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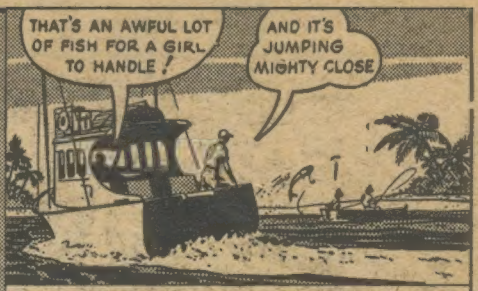

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IN THE SADDLE

PEOPLE today are inclined to wonder about the giants who built the Old West; they were, it seems, a different species, sometimes a little more than human, sometimes a little less, but always amazing. The question that bothers most of us mere moderns is—how did they do it?

Well, the answer isn't easy. It involves a lot of talk about brain and muscle and just plain old fashioned guts, which enabled men to stand up to a country which resisted civilization for a long time, and in a lot of places still does. All that talk is fine, and true as far as it goes, but it ignores perhaps the most important factor of all in the forming of the Old West—the sense of humor people developed and used as one of their chief weapons in the battle for survival. It was practically as necessary as a canteen on the desert or a fast gun in a roaring railhead town.

Perhaps without realizing it, Westerners developed and used such a sense of humor in their everyday dealings—whether taking care of a dignitary or a hardcase, asking directions from a friendly buffalo, or what have you. Here are a few examples of the sort of thing we mean:

The puffing of the first Southern Pacific train into Tucson, Arizona, on March 20, 1880, signaled the end of adolescence for the Old Pueblo. Dignity was now the order, and no longer could the whole town be expected to get drunk, shoot up the works, and start a several days' jamboree at the branding of a steer. But this first train was too good an occasion to pass up, and an apocryphal tale of the city evolved.

With a little alcoholic spur, the mayor and other city officials telegraphed the President of the United States, and the mayors of Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York, advising of the City's emergence into adulthood. As the party

(Continued on page 8)

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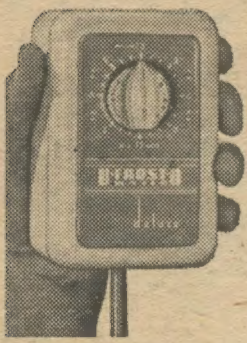

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IN THE SADDLE

(Continued from page 6)

progressed, the history of the Great Southwest was recalled, and the important part played by the pioneering, zealous priests. The longer they dwelled on the hardships of these brave men, the more sympathetic and lachrymose the men became. Finally a natural outlet for their emotions came to them: Telegraph His Holiness the Pope, advising him of the success of his flock. With a few more drinks, and thought, the following telegram was composed:

Tucson, Arizona
March 20, 1880

To His Holiness the Pope of Rome, Italy:

The Mayor of Tucson begs the honor of reminding Your Holiness that this ancient and honorable pueblo was founded by the Spaniards under the sanction of your Church more than three (3) centuries ago, and to inform Your Holiness that a railroad from San Francisco now connects us with the Christian World.

R. N. Leatherwood, Mayor

Asking your benediction:

J. B. Salpointe, Vic. ap.

After this spirited message had been delivered to the telegraph office, some of the more serious-minded citizens interceded to prevent sending of the message. The operator reluctantly agreed.

But the obligations to his job and duty weighed heavily upon the operator. All day, while the revelry raged outside, he racked his brain to find a solution that would please both parties—those who had supposedly sent the message and those who had prevented its leaving. Finally, his face brightened and he scribbled the following message, which was delivered in the proper form to the anxious mayor:

His Holiness the Pope acknowledges with appreciation receipt of your telegram informing him that the ancient city of Tucson has at last has been connected by rail with the outside world and sends his benediction, but for his own satisfaction would ask, where in hell is Tucson anyway?

DESPITE the large number of outlaws the Frontier boasted, many a Western town lacked a jail. The usual explanation was that prisoners rarely

(Continued on page 10)

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IN THE SADDLE

(Continued from page 8)

found any time to spend in jail. As soon as sentence was passed they were marched to the nearest cottonwood. That way the town was spared the small cost of feeding them.

The towns that found it necessary to lock up a convicted gunslick solved the problem with usual American ingenuity. On occasion, however, this inventiveness backfired.

Bishop, California, managed without a jail, though it had enough opportunity to use one. The sheriff solved the problem by handcuffing prisoners to wheels of freight wagons. Once, when no wagon was available, the culprit was fastened with his arms around a small tree. The next morning he was missing. He had shinnied to the top of the tree, bent over the smaller branches, dropped to the ground and disappeared. That afternoon the Bishop committeemen voted unanimously to build a good solid jail.

Prisoners who were found guilty in Florence, Arizona, were in for a shock—although a pleasant one. Florence was minus a pokey and did the next best thing. They too made use of handcuffs, but instead of wagonwheels, they fastened the convicted man to the railing of the town saloon. There the judge, who was also barkeep, could keep a close eye on him.

Many patrons finishing their fifth drink were prone to feeling sorry for the chained convict, and would buy him a drink. Florence was forced to abandon this form of imprisonment after word spread throughout the West. Too many men swarmed into town to confess to crimes they hadn't committed.

One small town in Nevada was jailless, and the sheriff used his house to store the prisoners. The sheriff was a bachelor and didn't mind the extra company. Once, during the course of a card game, a dispute arose between two cowpokes named Sullivan and Abbott. Abbott accused Sullivan of cheating. Both hit for leather. The result was a dead Abbott and a wounded Sullivan. Sullivan, who had a passion for marked cards and shooting his playmates, was taken to the sheriff's house, where he was nursed back to health.

(Continued on page 12)

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IN THE SADDLE

(Continued from page 10)

When he was completely mended the sheriff allowed him to leave the "jail" and wander about town. Eventually Sullivan was tried and sentenced to hang. The court insisted that the sheriff keep the prisoner under closer scrutiny—no wandering!

This order offended the sheriff. He promised that Sullivan would appear for the hanging, but until then he saw no point of keeping him under lock and key. If the court insisted on complete imprisonment, he would resign. Sullivan evidently appreciated the sheriff's faith in him. To make sure that temptation wouldn't take him out of town on the day of the hanging, he shot himself with one of the lawman's guns.

He left a note saying: *Tell the boys good-bye. You needn't resign. Better lock up the others who come along; they may not think as much of you as I do.*

Shallow Creek, Montana, had long been without a lockup. The county authorities thought it too expensive to build one. "Cheaper to shoot them or let them escape," was their economical reply. Irate citizens complained about the crime wave, and finally a county commissioner was named as a Committee Of One to investigate. His decision would be final.

He entered the largest saloon in town and started questioning the occupants. Unfortunately, the saloon he chose to conduct his investigation was the hangout for some of the West's most notorious gunmen. When they heard the commissioner's question, "Do you think Shallow Creek needs a jail?" their reply was to give him a good sound beating.

That night, a bloody but wiser commissioner made his way back to the county seat. "Shallow Creek has a definite need for a jail!" he reported. A month later, Shallow Creek had its jail.

Perhaps the strangest form of imprisonment was in Yarville, Texas. Yarville took its prisoners and made them deputies. The sheriff's explanation was, "It takes a crook to catch a crook!" Strangely enough, it worked. Yarville eventually had so many outlaws on the force that there weren't any more thieves to catch.

(Continued on page 14)

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IN THE SADDLE

(Continued from page 12)

THREE alternatives face every man: To go forward, turn backward, or stand still. These three confronted Capt. William Becknell in June of 1822, as he stared bleary-eyed at his thirst-crazed men in the dry bed of the Cimarron River, in what is now the Oklahoma Panhandle.

"If we turn back," he said, "maybe most of us can reach the Arkansas again. Of course, we would have to abandon the wagons and take the horses and mules."

He paused. There was no reply from parched lips, nothing but looks of hopelessness from the dust-reddened eyes.

"If we go on, some of you men might reach that plateau way off yonder. Then again, we might all perish. Or—" And he sighed as he scooped a handful of sand and let it trickle through his fingers, "we might wander up and down this dry wash looking for a waterhole."

It was Becknell's second trading expedition to Santa Fe. A year ago he had left his home at Franklin, Missouri, with sixteen other hardy adventurers, each man riding a horse and leading another animal loaded down with calico and knick-knacks. Crossing the Missouri river at Arrow Rock, they proceeded through Independence and Council Grove to Pawnee Rock, then followed the Arkansas River westward, their destination somewhere south of the headwaters of that river.

Becknell had heard that the Comanches rustled mules from the Spanish settlers in that country. They were worth seventy-five dollars apiece on the St. Louis market, and the Missouri traders were sure the Indians could be persuaded to part with the animals for a few dollars worth of trinkets. But after many hardships, they found no Indians. Instead they encountered Spanish cavalrymen near what is now Raton Pass.

Surprisingly enough, they proved friendly, but there was a reason: Mexico had seceded from Spain. They escorted the Missourians to San Miguel. After visiting there they went on to Santa Fe, where Becknell's party displayed their wares to the Mexicans. It was a sellout, and at prices far above the St. Louis market.

A social call to the governor of New

(Continued on page 112)

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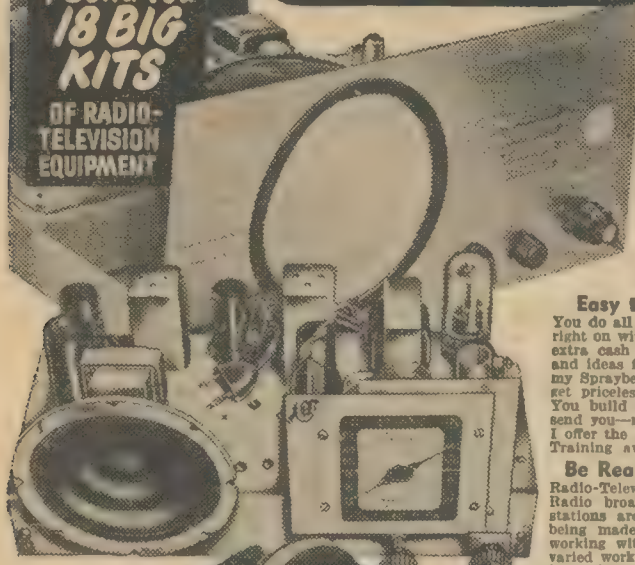

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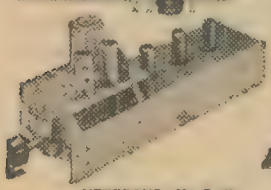

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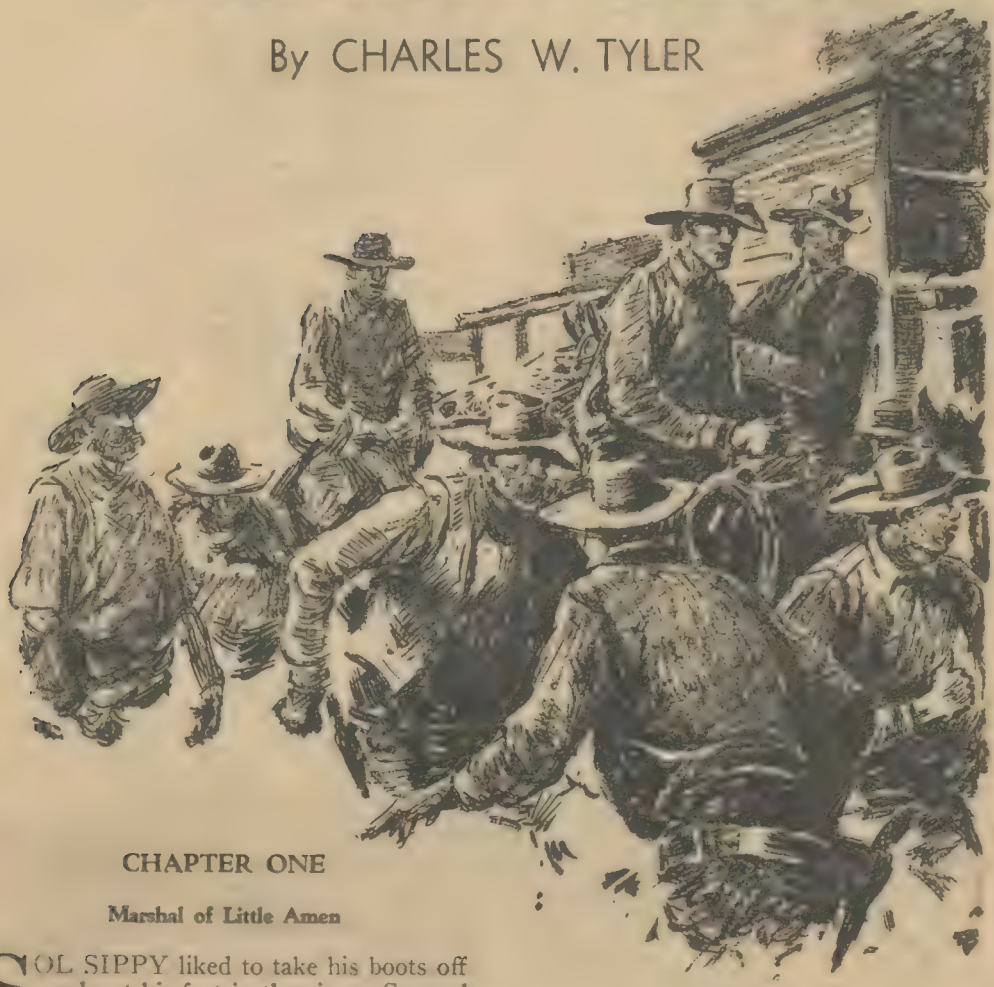
RANGE OF MISSING MEN

By CHARLES W. TYLER



While Teck Langtry tried to get to him . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Marshal of Little Amen

SOL SIPPY liked to take his boots off and put his feet in the river. Seemed like a man could think better, a-setting there in the sun, listening to the talk of the old Pecos. Funny about a river. It started out clean and sparkling, 'way up

yonder in the mountains, but as soon as it began rubbing elbows with the world it got muddied up. Times it was lazy and full of chuckles; next you knew it was a-hooting and a-brawling. Just like some folks.

Sol Sippy looked across the river where the two ruts threaded down off the bench, his eyes full of brooding. The sheriff likely would be back pretty soon now. Mainland never wasted any time when he went after a man. Be locking the prisoner up for the night in the Little Amen jail.

Sol wagged his head gloomily and squirmed his toes in the mud. Raised up in the Sangre de Cristo, the Pecos was, when the world was in the making, and went wandering off to Texas. Seen a sight of humans come and go. Coronado's army, the wagon trains, Billy the Kid—Jody Prine.

Scaley went back through the hitch rail with the bronc. . . .

Sol Sippy hadn't figured Jody was a killer. "It ain't in him," he had told Bide Mainland.

But Bide was powerful set in his mind. "He did it all right."

"Why, Jody ain't turned eighteen," Sol had said.

"Just the age of Billy the Kid when he started all his hell-raising." That was Mainland for you.

Dust finally built a yellow mushroom on the rim of the bench. Sol Sippy watched it, his chubby feet drying on a hot rock. He dragged his boots on slowly and started up the road from the river crossing in his funny duck waddle.

The climbing ruts leveled off at the end of Pecos Street and the little fat man in the flat-crowned hat let his glance run down its shabby length. Odd Ide, the hostler, was talking to a couple punchers by the feed yard gate. Dan Trifalgo's store had drawn a loose group, and the chairs on the gallery of old man Foley's hotel were all occupied, with an overflow draped on the railing.

Mid-afternoon, Pecos Street was near deserted most times. But today folks were stirring up a breeze. That Jody Prine!

Several cow ponies were in front of Border Saloon. The Cross 4 iron. Sol Sippy fixed that in his mind. Word sure got around—'specially bad news.

Sol cut across a couple of back yards to the jail, standing near the end of Roswell Street, and unlocked the door. Mainland might bring his prisoner there first, Sol reasoned, instead of parading him down Pecos Street for folks to stare at.

The ageless myth of the Gran Quivira had brought Sol Sippy out of the Texas Panhandle and across the Staked Plains. That and other things. There was no ancient treasure, as the conquistadores had learned long ago, only some very old pueblos and these paisanos, who did nothing today that would wait until tomorrow. Mañana, that was.

This New Mexico Territory, Sol found, was a place of great plateaus and red canyons and blue sky. They called it the land of *poco tiempo*—pretty soon. It had its legends—and its sixguns.

A pilgrim had stopped at the Pecos crossing one day, the story went, with a broken wagon wheel. There was grass and a bit of shade for a siesta. The wagon wheel could wait until . . . tomorrow.

That was the beginning of Little Amen.

Almost nothing ever happened in Little Amen, and one day Dan Trifalgo, the *hermano mayor*, which means head man, looked musingly at Sol Sippy and said, "Anyone can ride a gentle horse." And directly Sol found himself town marshal, with a badge and a gun belt.

This made Odd Ide, his friend, very sad. "Jist give some tough hombre an excuse to shoot at ye."

Sol told everybody that he wasn't cut out for a marshal, and everybody agreed. He was too good-natured, for one thing—and he was slow. When trouble started, he was assured, there were only the quick and the dead.

"Golly," Sol Sippy said.

Sol kept the shoebox jail whitewashed and tidy and never bothered to lock it—not until grub-liners, drifting into Little Amen, became aware of its possibilities as a bunkhouse. The quality of the food and the general homey atmosphere appealed to the few official guests and they were hard to be rid of.

Sol Sippy went slowly along Roswell Street toward the group by Dan Trifalgo's store, and so came under the pressure of the eyes of Teck Langtry, Cross 4 ramrod. Looking at the marshal waddling up, Langtry's dead stare turned baldly contemptuous.

Sol smiled a little, bobbed his head politely but briefly. Somebody came along the street from the river shelf, yammering the news.

"Mainland's coming down to the ford. They got 'im!"

SOL SIPPY reckoned the lonesomest person in the world right now was Jody Prine. A pair of bracelets could separate a man and his friends quicker than anything, it looked like. Everybody in Little Amen knew Jody, but today he was a stranger.

Jody didn't look his seventeen. He was spare-framed, with a pinched, high-boned face, set with blue eyes that stared straight ahead. His levis were faded and patched. His shirt had a tear in a sleeve and his boots were down at the heels. A beaten out hat was crushed onto his head.

He sat the saddle with a kind of stubborn pride that held him ramrod straight, and his homeliness became a granite rock set against the storm. Jody Prine was taking his hard baptism of fire like a man.

The slow tattoo of hoofs brought men spilling out of doorways and the clatter of their voices filled sleepy Pecos Street. Mainland pulled up in front of Trifalgo's store, sizing up the Cross 4 crowd coming over from the Border Saloon. He looked at Langtry then, his lips thinning out.

Sol figured he knew just what Mainland was thinking. Tecate and the solid security of the county jail was a far piece—eighty tough miles, to be exact.

Teck Langtry gave Jody a long scrutiny, his eyes wicked. The Cross 4 men, their skins full of whiskey, were talking it up. Reminded Sol of barking dogs—they were braver in a pack.

A few folks were looking at Jody as though they might have a mind to speak, but not with Langtry watching. Anybody friendly to Jody Prine would be on the Cross 4 freezeout list mighty quick. Man wanted to stay healthy, he just couldn't go around waving a flag. 'Course, Sol reflected, now an' then there was some obstinate cuss a prairie fire wouldn't budge.

Langtry's eyes shifted to the sheriff. "Any trouble?"

"None," Mainland said. He turn to Sol. "Got the jail keys?"

"Door's unlocked," Sol said, waving his hand in the direction of the jail down toward the end of Roswell Street.

"We're stayin' over," Mainland said. "You better let me have the keys."

"Oh, no," Sol said. "I couldn't do that." Easy to see that Mainland was looking for trouble and he was afraid the marshal of Little Amen would frazzle in a showdown.

Mainland was carved out of rock but he was starting to show wear and tear. "Have it your way," he told Sol, "but if you ever let loose of 'em you're goin' to have a bad time."

Sol waddled out past the hitch rail, his round face cheerful as a new dipper, and slapped the prisoner on the leg. "'Lo, Jody, m'boy."

Jody managed a sorry grin. "Hi, Sol."

"Chicken 'n' dumplin's fer supper, kid," Sol said, smacking his lips.

"Feed 'im good," somebody in the Cross 4 crowd said, "it might be his last meal."

Sol saw the kid's lips tighten a little; that was all.

Mainland said angrily, "Break it up!" He set his horse forward but the Cross 4 punchers held their ground.

Teck Langtry's face was bleak. "Don't start anything, Mainland."

THIS conflict between the two was dangerous, Sol saw, and liable to explode. Until now Little Amen had stayed clear of wars and feuding. Mostly, the folks out in the wind-washed graveyard had died from age or sickness, all quiet and peaceful, but now it looked like there was going to be some shortcuts.

Mainland had made his play; if he backed up he was whipped. It was just like Langtry wanted. A showdown.

Sam Sharp, Mainland's deputy, had pushed his horse tight past Sol to flank out the sheriff. Sol's thumb came up hard and took the bronc in the soft under belly. This sabotage was accompanied by a high Comanche *"Yipe!"* The mainspring let go. The horse sank its head between its forelegs and came apart under the saddle. Sam was braced for gun-trouble, not bucking, and he was in the clouds before he could anchor to the horn.

Big Rince Scaley, Cross 4 segundo, was squarely in the path of the horsehide convulsion and he went through the hitchrail with the windmilling bronc. Big Rince was a black one, and gun-quick when the signs were right, but a man getting hallelujahed by a bucker had no time for calculated murder.

Seam Faber, drawing pay at the Cross 4 for his ability to chop a man down with lead, was spur-tracked by the hurtling deputy before he fully grasped current events. He reeled to his knees in the swirl of dust and crashing bodies.

Teck Langtry remembered only the moon-faced smirk of a little fat man, somewhere in this boil of horseflesh, flapping holsters and human debris, and the fleeting thought in the back of his rioting brain was to beat this pudding-head flat at the first opportunity.

Mainland's bronc caught the contagion and let go in a spiraling sunfish that tore apart two team horses and a buckboard in front of Trifalgo's store. A broken wagon

pole flailed out and wiped a yowling innocent from the sidewalk. Langtry churned for high ground a fraction ahead of the teeth of the storm, oaths choking him.

Seam Faber came up with a flattened nose and a hazy notion that Little Amen had been leveled by an act of God. Sam Sharp staggered from the reeling orbit of end-swapping and jack-knifing to see Sol Sippy heading down Roswell Street with the prisoner in tow.

Mainland's thinking was a little fuzzy when his squealing bronc finally was quieted, and he was still struggling to get the thing straightened out when Sam Sharp steered his attention to this pair leisurely making tracks for the jail.

Bide Mainland took a fresh grip while the dust settled. The Cross 4 bunch offered no immediate menace. There was only a few groans and Langtry's futile cursing. The sheriff sided Sam Sharp and together they went on down Roswell Street.

"What in hell happened?" Mainland growled.

"That fat stinker shoved his thumb in my hoss's belly," Sam Sharp said, "right to the hilt."

"You don't mean Sol?" Mainland said.

"That's who."

Mainland's brow furrowed in deep perplexity. "Hard to tell," he said, "how much of that pot-bellied ape is tallow and how much is brains."

"You can have him," Sam Sharp said, limping along. "I'll take my chances with Injuns."

SOL SIPPY knew how it was with owl-hooters. A man, mebbe, got off to a wrong start, and then spent the rest of his meager life wishing he had it all to do over again. Sometimes a jasper on the dodge just kept circulating in bad company until somebody laid him low. On the other hand, a hombre might come out of the brush with another name and hunt a quiet town in another state or territory and be real respectable. He might even get to be town marshal.

This was, indeed, the Never-Never land of the Gran Quivira. Here a man had peace and friends—friends who, without doubt, would arise to valiant heights if he was sore pressed. What greater treasure could the world offer?

A lot of men had to leave Texas one time or another, and not all went up the trail to Kansas. There was Odd Ide, who had found two names too heavy for a man making tracks far apart. Odd had "borrowed" a horse once, back in Texas, but once was enough. He'd never gone back to the state of his birth.

Old man Foley, the present proprietor of the Gran Posada Hotel, had stolen a piece of rope—an almost worthless thing—and this sin he was led to confess to a wise padre, who drew from him the final admission that there had been a cow at the end of it.

Jim Suggs had shot a man. He had, in fact, shot a number of men, but mainly with the idea of preventing them from becoming murderers. Dan Trifalgo had found Texas too crowded and he had left one night, thus avoiding the further occasion of sin.

The plight of Jody Prine was the result of a shooting scrape out in the *Mascaradas* which had involved a little cowman named Lief Adamson. Lief had a few cows, a piece of grass and a little water, and he was content.

Now where there was a cow and grass and water, Sol had learned, there was trouble. Somebody else always wanted one or all of them. A man somewhere in the very long ago had devised a system of establishing ownership by writing a totem on a cow with a branding iron, and so had promptly multiplied the complications and afflictions of cows and horses and the folks who owned them.

To assure perpetuity in cow ownership, a man required a gun. The more cows, the more guns.

Through the employment of practices generally frowned on, Teck Langtry was on the way to establishing a cattle empire. His Cross 4 heraldry had spread out like an engulfing flood, until it reached and surrounded Lief Adamson's little spread in the Masquerades.

When the red scourge of the Lincoln County War had orphaned Jody Prine, Lief had taken him in. Jody didn't remember his mother, who had died when the wagon trains were rolling west to Santa Fe, and Mrs. Adamson had been everything a real mother could be these past few years.

THEN this trouble with Teck Langtry began. Nothing to speak of at first, just a little talk back and forth. . . .

"You ain't thinkin' of sellin', Lief?"

"No, I don't guess so, Teck. This place suits me good."

Then the Cross 4 stuff started crowding in; eating up the Adamson grass, mixing with Lief's animals at the waterholes.

"I got some rights, Langtry."

"You had your chance, Adamson. I only make a proposition once."

It was as old as the West, old as the world. Grab.

Jody had seen it since he could reach a stirrup. Whose cow? Whose grass? Whose water?

"This is my range, Mister Langtry."

"Yours if you can hold it!"

Adamson began losing stock. The handwriting was on the wall. One day Big Scaley brought a hide to town and nailed it to the livery barn wall, wrong side out. That was after Lief had complained about rustlers in the Masquerades.

When a rustler worked over a brand an almost infallible means of establishing rightful ownership was to kill the animal and inspect the marks showing through on the inside.

The hide on the barn in Little Amen showed a Barred L A brand burned into a Cross 4—Teck Langtry's iron.

That was all. It finished Lief in the Masquerades. He scraped together a few dollars and bought out a sodbuster east of the Pecos—a homesteader, who windmilled his water out of the ground—and tried to round up some of his cattle, pretty well mixed with Cross 4 stuff now. But Adamson never quite made it. A bullet stopped him.

Mainland came up from Tecate. He had heard about that hide nailed up in Little Amen, but there was little enough he could do about it until Langtry filed complaint. A killing was different.

"Some of my men caught him blotching the brand on a Cross 4 animal," Langtry said. "He went for a gun."

Folks in Little Amen had their own opinions. They didn't think Adamson was a rustler. The way Sol Sippy looked at it, the Cross 4 had blotched that brand them-

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selves. Langtry had no scruples about crushing anyone who got in his road. He was in the driver's seat. Aiming to control not only a lot of range but the county government before he was done.

SOL SIPPY thought of the day Jody and Mrs. Adamson came through Little Amen on their way to that sodbuster's place out east. A lot of household belongings and some gear, and a big stolid woman on the wagon seat. And Jody, trailing the saddle stock.

Jody Prine and Ma

In the store, Don Trifalgo said, "How many head you figger that windmill's goin' to take care of, Huldah?"

"Likely all the stuff we'll ever git out," Mrs. Adamson said, dead-toned.

Nobody could think of anything to say to that, no more than they could find words to express their sorrow. Lief had been mighty well thought of.

"Anythin' we kin do," Jim Suggs said awkwardly, "ye jist say the word. We'll be right happy to accomodate, Marm."

Mrs. Adamson got the few things they were needing. "How much I owe you, Dan?"

Dan Trifalgo rummaged through a dog-eared account book and wrote down some figures; then screwed up his pock-marked face and said, "Accordin' to what I got down, Lief had forty-two dollars credit comin' fer beef delivered."

Folks wondered sometimes how Dan Trifalgo ever made a cent—the things he did for folks when there was trouble.

Sol had watched them through the thinning dust—Huldah and Jody, going on down to the river crossing. The trundling wagon, the horse band and that grulla, the familiar mouse-colored horse Lief used to ride.

"Reckon Lief is goin' to be right lonely out there in the Mascaradas," Dan Trifalgo said, using the Spanish pronunciation.

Before Mainland had headed back to Tecate he said to Langtry, "What about those Adamson cattle?"

"They'll be out there," Langtry said, "any time the old woman wants to send for them. Might have a little trouble roundin' 'em up."

Mainland knew exactly what the Cross 4 man meant, but it didn't look like there was much anyone hereabouts could do about it.

Odd Ide pulled down the hide on the livery barn and threw it onto the manure pile, and the days ran into weeks and the weeks ran right out of the bottom of the hourglass. Folks were on the way to forgetting the affair out in the Masquerades.

Then, all of a sudden, Teck Langtry was in town, screaming his head off. Griff Vogel was dead and Ed Frye was just hanging on. "Two of my best men!"

Sol figured Langtry meant his "best gunmen."

"It was that damned Jody Prine!" Langtry shouted, "ridin' that grulla of Adamson's. Bushwhacked Griff an' Ed in Turkey Canyon an' run off thirty head."

"Whose cows?" Dan Trifalgo said. "Barred L A or Cross 4?"

Langtry puffed up like an adder. "How the hell do I know?"

Little Amen buzzed with talk. "Cut a notch fer Lief," Jim Suggs said.

Folks couldn't figure Jody going back to the Masquerades all alone after some of those cattle of Lief's. It was crazy, they said.

"When a kid goes bad," Mainland said, "look out."

"I'll bet Jody will tell plenty," old man Foley said, "if he ever gets onto the witness stand."

"He won't ever git to take the stand," Odd Ide said. "Not if Langtry kin help it."

CHAPTER TWO

Gun-Pard of Senor Dios

BIDE MAINLAND was set to explode. When he and Sam Sharp reached the jail Jody was around the corner getting a bucket of water at the pump. Sol Sippy was sitting on the bench beside the open door.

"What kind of business is this?" Mainland yelled. "Lock up that prisoner!"

"Shaw, now," Sol said, "Jody ain't agoin' t'git away."

"I ought to bend a gun over your head, you fat fool!" Sam said, rubbing his leg. "I near got tramped to death."

"Ye don't tell," Sol said. He waved his hand at Jody. "Wash basin in there some place, kid. Make yese'f to home."

Jody found the basin and began washing up at one end of the bench. In the hills to the north a thunderstorm was starting to bang around.

"Looks like rain," Sol said.

"You sabe what's goin' to happen, don't you?" The little fat man sitting there commenting on the weather as though it was of high conversational value incensed the sheriff.

"Mebbe."

"Langtry's crowd is ripe to tear this town apart," Mainland flung out.

"Yes," put in Sam Sharp, "and if there is anything left standing they're going to throw a rope over it!"

"They kain't do that," Sol said. "We'd git 'em fer disturbin' the peace."

"Listen to him!" hooted the deputy. "He thinks all we got to do is holler 'booger!' an' they'll take to the hills."

Mainland sent an uneasy glance at the ebb and flow of humans beyond the corner—pulling down the broken hitchrail, straightening out the wrecked wagon, clotting up, gesturing. The high drone of voices was like the sound of angry bees.

The sheriff pulled his eyes away to regard Sol Sippy with resentment, uncertainty. He said finally, "The Cross 4 crowd was half drunk to start with and right now they're primed for trouble at the drop of the hat. Be more riders drifting in from those satellite outfits of Langtry's by nightfall. Then look out!"

"Dunno what ever Missus Adamson will do without Jody out there," Sol said.

The kid took a final rub with the flour-sack towel and stood looking at the fat man as though he was the only sure friend he had in the world. "Next to Lief, Ma misses the Masquerades most, I guess. It's awful lonesome, out there on the plains."

"Never liked plains," Sol said obscurely. "Ye kin see a man too far."

It was in Mainland's mind that back down the years he had heard of a fat man who had left Texas in a hurry and under something of a cloud. No mistaking a Texan. Seemed like quite a few of them had migrated to Little Amen.

Jody found a comb inside and came out to complete his toilet before the broken mirror fastened to the wall above the bench. Long Shorty, one of Mainland's men, turned his horse into Roswell Street and came toward the jail at a leisurely trot.

"How's it look?" Mainland said.

"Them birds are spittin' thick," said Long Shorty. "I look for a large evenin'."

"I think we'd better try to get the kid out of here after dark," said Mainland.

"They'll be expectin' something like that," Sharp said. "Langtry is a hard man to fox."

Sol stood up and began patting his pockets. "Now I wonder what I done with them jail keys."

"Goddlemighty!" said the sheriff, waving his hands.

"Ye want to ride over to the house," Sol said, looking at Long Shorty, "an' tell mother to look on the nail behind the door?" Sol pointed. "That last 'dobe."

"Did you leave them in the jail?" demanded Sam Sharp exasperatedly.

"It's an idea," Sol said. "You boys want to look?"

BIDE MAINLAND regarded the marshal with incredulity. Sol explored beneath the bench and patted his pockets again. The jail keys were large; they were on an iron ring. They weren't something a man could mislay handily.

"Had 'em jist 'fore you fellers got here," Sol said. "Unlocked the jail, but all this how-do has got me fussed."

Sam Sharp headed into the jail, breathing fire. Mainland trailed him, angry, impatient; they had a prisoner to lock up.

Up the river outlaw gods were dueling, the reports of their guns growing louder. A black squall was charging down on Little Amen; it was getting dark. Sol said, "Jody, ye want to light the lamp fer the boys?"

Sol waited outside for Long Shorty. He dragged out a kerchief and mopped his face. Ever since Mainland and the posse riders had passed through Little Amen on their way to get Jody Prine he had struggled with a problem.

Thinking was a laborious process that required aching effort, like running uphill.

Mainland was a rock; he would never surrender his prisoner without a fight, but the Cross 4 were too many for him. Langtry had tipped his hand, there in front of Trifalgo's; he would beat down resistence by force of numbers, just like he had out in the Masquerades. Once Mainland was

out of the way a howling hangmob was going to be loose.

The general confusion and minor casualties had diverted attention from the sheriff and his prisoner for the time being. No one seemed to know what had touched off the upheaval, which started some discussion and speculation.

Langtry strongly suspected trickery, and he was seething, but he didn't know whence it had stemmed. Big Rince Scaley, somewhat battered but navigating under his own power, didn't know either.

"Couple of you go up to the jail an' see what's goin' on," Langtry said. "Tell Mainland I want to see him over to the hotel."

The segundo motioned at a Cross 4 man, Limpy Culp, and they trooped up the middle of Roswell Street toward the jail. Sol Sippy watched them. Big Scaley was bad medicine. Limpy Culp was a smaller dose but just as hard to take.

Mainland and Sam Sharp were prowling around inside the bastile, clanging cell doors and cussing, hunting those missing keys. Decision rode heavily. Things were not working out exactly as Sol had planned, but watching Scaley and Limpy approaching prodded him to action.

Sol dug inside his shirt, pulled out the jail keys with one hand and with the other reached for the latch and hauled the three-inch plank door shut. He inserted the big, hand-forged key in the lock and turned the bolt.

Will Noddy, the blacksmith, had hammered out and fitted the hardware for the door, and it was a credit to his craftsmanship. The jail was the only public building in Little Amen and pride of ownership had demanded a structure that time would dent scarcely at all.

With the thump of the closing door and the significant scrape of the bolt hitting home, a flat silence clamped down. It was broken by Mainland's oath. "What's goin' on here?"

Sam Sharp jumped for the door and found it as solid as the wall. "Why, the dirty, connivin' dough-belly has locked us in!"

"Look, Sol," Mainland called, grim-toned, "if I lay my hands on you—"

"You boys be quiet," Sol said. "Here comes trouble."

MAINLAND moved to the narrow, barred opening set shoulder-high in a side wall and saw Big Rince Scaley and Limpy Culp walking briskly toward the jail. Near the front corner he saw Sol Sippy, his pudgy fingers gripping the iron keyring that Will Noddy had hammered out.

Mainland sucked his breath in slowly through his teeth. This could be the start of something serious.

Long Shorty rode up. "Where did yuh find the keys, ole hoss?"

" 'S'funny," Sol said, "I had 'em all the time."

"Only weigh a couple pounds," Long Shorty said. "Yuh done well to locate 'em."

The Cross 4 men stopped in front of the jail, eyeing Long Shorty alertly; then they switched their attention to the fat man, standing there with the jail keys.

A flash and a thunderclap signaled the closing storm front. A hard gust slapped at Little Amen.

Big Rince said, "Where's Mainland?"

"I expect he's 'round some place," Sol said.

Long Shorty saw that the jail door was closed and concluded that the sheriff and Sam Sharp had left. He glanced up-river at the rain-cloud trailing its black streamers. "Goin' to git it," he said. "Reckon I'll stable up 'fore she hits."

"You see Mainland," Big Rince said, "tell him Langtry wants to talk to him. Teck will be at the hotel."

Long Shorty gave the Cross 4 man a brief scrutiny and nodded; then set his horse moving on down Roswell Street.

It was in Mainland's mind to call to the lanky posseman, but he decided against it. So long as Langtry was in the dark as to his whereabouts he had a hole card. It came to the sheriff that Sol Sippy, perhaps, had a longer head than they had thought. Come a showdown, a couple men forted up in the jail were going to be hard to knock loose.

Sharp stole a glance from the barred opening. "Standin' out there wavin' them damn keys under their snoots," he muttered.

Big Rince and Limpy moved out of sight around the corner and those in the jail heard someone try the door. Then there was the voice of Sol, polite as hell.

"Anythin' I kin do fer you boys?"

It was Big Rince who answered. "Yuh can hand over them keys, fatty."

Mainland and Sam Sharp exchanged glances. This was it.

"Allus aim to 'comerdate," Sol said in his friendliest tone. "Yes, s'ree. But I tell ye how 'tis—"

"Let's have 'em!" Big Rince added an epithet. He moved up close to the marshal. "An' cut the talk."

There were no window openings in the front of the jail, no way now that Mainland and Sam Sharp could help. Jody Prine stood in one of the cells, his hands gripping the bars. Sol Sippy was his friend.

There was a flash and the quick battering of thunder. Wind was coming.

"Me, I don't mind the lightnin'," Sol said, "but I'd hate to git hit with a clap of that thunder."

"Close yore jaw or I'll shoot yore belly off!" This was Limpy Culp, his voice pitched a little higher.

The squall was beating the sagebrush, kicking tin cans around, slamming doors. Sol looked at Limpy, his six-shooter gripped in his fist, turned his eyes to Big Rince, set to lunge.

In Little Amen, folks said Sol was a great one for talk. Spar around and auger until someone would want to kill him. Sol Sippy had been sparring now, standing off Big Rince and Limpy, lookin' to Señor Dios to put in with him.

One full pace separated Sol and Big Rince. Limpy was back a little against the jail. The segundo came onto the balls of his feet for his lunge. The wind hit Roswell Street and Big Rince turned his shoulder to it, squinting his eyes against hurtling sand and twigs.

Sol swung then. The heavy keys hit Big Rince across the bridge of the nose. Blood spurted, he staggered, bellowing like a bull, and fumbled for his six-shooter. But the holster was empty.

The fat man showed no speed of movement, either, in crashing the great keys across Big Rince's eyes or in moving around him and lifting the Colt .45 from the Cross 4 man's gunbelt, but rather a ponderous fixedness of purpose not unlike the movement of a slogging freight wagon.

Culp, buffeted by screaming dust, saw through the blur of it the sudden show of fight by the marshal and drove a bullet that way, but his shooting was wild. The breathless surge of the wind in a world torn apart caught him, blanketed him for a thin instant and when his vision cleared he was looking into a gun-muzzle pouring flame at him.

Limpy, partly turned by the blow of the missile, set his shoulder hard against the jail wall and desperately tried to put a slug into that expanse of paunch, but he was over the range—a dead man when he hit the ground.

A FEW hailstones bounced around and pint-size drops splashed down; then the rain came, like water over a dam. A sound that was not thunder a moment before had turned a man on the gallery of Dan Trifalgo's store toward Roswell Street and he looked past the corner in the direction of the jail at the edge of town. This man's shout emptied the store.

Across Pecos Street from Trifalgo's were a few galleryites and here and there a person hurrying to get somewhere else before the downpour. The impact of the shots, only partly dimmed by the young gale, started up a yammer of voices on this front that reached behind the Border Saloon's batwing doors. Seam Faber and Brat Konedig and two or three riders from the Cross 4's affiliate, the 7 Y, swarmed out.

Little Amen was running a fever and it didn't take much to start the patient on the road to delirium. Langtry had posted men to guard against the possibility of the sheriff slipping Jody Prine out of town, and he had been around to the saloons arranging for free drinks for the riders in town and the others who were expected.

Langtry, with everything set to his notion, finally went to the Gran Posada to wait for Mainland. He let everyone know that he had sent for the sheriff and promised that Mainland was going to have to listen to the voice of the Cross 4, and he went on to boast of its expanding herds and range.

Old man Foley, off in a corner, listened sourly. "If I'd astayed in Texas," he confided to a Kansas City whiskey drummer, "they'd ahung me fer what that windbag is braggin' on."

Langtry's talk was getting high. "When I crack the whip, somebody's goin' to jump."

"Was that a shot?" someone said. "Listen, there it is again."

Langtry started for the door, and he was standing there, looking up Roswell Street, when the rain began coming down. Watching this figure moving heavy-footed through the slanting rain sheets brought quick puzzlement to the cowman's face, and this turned to hang-jawed astonishment when he saw that it was Big Rince.

The segundo plowed on across Pecos Street, already thick with slick mud, and swayed up the hotel steps, his breath high and gusty. Those on the gallery saw then that there were bloody rivulets mixing with the rain on his face.

Big Rince flapped his hand in a gesture aimed at Roswell Street. "He got Limpy!" His voice was high, unnatural.

"You talkin' about Mainland?" Langtry said sharply.

"I ain't seen Mainland," Rince Scaley said, spitting out the blood and water that seeped into his mouth. "This was Sol!"

"Sol?" cried Langtry. "Sol Sippy? You mean that tub of guts shot somebody?"

"Limpy is layin' up there in the rain," Big Rince said, "if yuh want to take a look at him."

The rain beat in across the hotel gallery but Teck Langtry didn't seem to notice it. He was trying to picture Little Amen's waddling marshal outgunning a quick-trigger man like Limpy Culp. He looked closely at the segundo's oozing beak. "And what happened to you?"

"Me an' Limp was jist lookin' around," Big Scaley said, "when he busts me one an' grabs my six-shooter."

"Just like that." Langtry smiled bleakly, taking Big Rince by the elbow and turning him into the hotel office. "Go get a drink; then find a gun and go after that possom-bellied old woman."

LONG SHORTY had been standing in the barn door talking with Odd Ide and Scat Jones, a posseman. What had become of Mainland was something of a poser. "Must be at the hotel," Long Shorty said.

"He went up Roswell Street with Sam after the rayfus," Scat said, "an' they ain't come back. I been watchin'."

"I tell ye, boys," Odd Ide said, "if I was in yore pants I'd stay kinda bunched. Come sundown, the snakes is liable to start to crawl."

"How many Cross 4 riders is there, for gosh sakes?" Scat said.

"Enough," Odd said. "They allus is plenty of them."

Jim Suggs, a small-voiced man who had left his past in Texas, came oozing inconspicuously out of the alley beside the livery barn. He took over as hostler when Odd went home.

"Gully-washer comin'," Jim Suggs offered. "Do a lot of good."

"Keep th' cricks from blowin' away fer a few days," Odd said.

Jim Suggs regarded Pecos Street and the cow ponies there with a jaundiced eye. The Cross 4, the 7 Y, the Doodle-Bug—Langtry's irons. "Think I'll shove over to Dan'l's an' git me some extra ca'tidges," Mr. Suggs mused.

Odd Ide dabbed his head up and down. "Handy to have. Mebbe ye'll git to practice on a targit or some sich."

Long Shorty and Scat Jones exchanged glances. There was some mention in Tecate now and then about Little Amen becoming a refuge for Texas "emigrants," so to speak.

Jim Suggs cast about. "Ain't seen Sol lately?"

"He was over to the calaboose just now," Long Shorty said. "Lost them God-awful jail keys for a couple hours. He should be more careful."

Jim Suggs' eyes sharpened. "Didn't I see some of them Cross 4 hombres aheadin' that way?"

"I left a couple of this Cross 4 crowd up there," Long Shorty said slowly, "talkin' to Sol."

The thunder squall hit then. And there were those shots, and the rain—and Big Rince coming out of Roswell Street with blood on his face. . . .

Sol Sippy reached the house out by the river along with the first big drops, slanting down. It was a sort of race between the little fat man and a big tumbleweed bounding along. Mother had been looking out of the window, and she said, "Hard to tell ye apart, only the tumbleweed ain't got

a six-shooter. You best come on inside."

You couldn't see the front of the jail from the side window, and Mother said then, "What's agoin' on, fer pity sake?"

"Couple fellers got into a fuss," Sol said. "How's the chicken 'n' dum'lin's?"

"They're adoin'."

"Got some boarders, over to the pokey."

Limpy Culp laid out there in the drenching rain, with never a person coming near him until it let up. Sol thought about the saying, "Happy is the corpse the rain falls on," but Limpy didn't look so happy. It was like once when the old Pecos was in flood and a poor lost pilgrim had come down and lodged on a sandbar, a mighty sorry-looking customer.

Limpy was finally toted into Dolph Keeler's little back room. Dolph ran a furniture store of sorts and attended to burying folks.

The big black cloud took its private shooting war on down the Pecos and the sun came out. Pecos Street became inhabited again. Now and then two or three men drifted up Roswell Street and stood around the jail with the patient expectancy of buzzards in the rimrock. A few trooped to the back door of Dolph Keeler's place and poked their heads in for a look at the late lamented Limpy.

Big Rince Scaley remained at the bar in the Gran Posada getting primed to go after Sol Sippy. But what he saw in the back bar mirror filled him with no enthusiasm. One discolored eye was puffed shut and there were other contusions and abrasions resulting from the skirmish with the law. He did not look to be in shape to bite off more trouble.

Langtry was joined by Seam Faber and Brat Konedig and one or two others in front of the hotel. The wet and steaming cow ponies began to disappear from the hitch rails as riders led them off to the livery barn. Somebody led away Limpy's horse.

It struck Dan Trifalgo that for once in his life the cattle king of the *Mascaradas* was not just dead sure of his next move, or too sure that it was his move. Clearly, Mainland's unexplained absence from the scene puzzled him.

Dan had come out of the store with Jim Suggs and they stood there talking. Suggs had a box of cartridges in his hand, which he opened now by slitting the wrapping with his thumb nail. Mr. Suggs was a horse-faced package, running undersize and scrawny, and Langtry would not have given him a second glance had it not been for that box of six-shooter cartridges.

AS HE talked with Trifalgo, the night hostler began slowly poking bright brass shells into the loops of his worn gun belt. Teck Langtry held this picture in his mind after Suggs had ambled off toward the livery barn.

If Little Amen had been a roaring trail town or a tough mining camp or one of the border holes, the Cross 4 ramrod would have been able to gauge its temper, but being just a sleepy pueblo of peaceful pursuits sight of a mouse-faced man taking aboard a cargo of sudden death stirred Langtry to sober reflection.

Until now, Teck Langtry had reckoned on Mainland and his four men as the fighting force he would have to contend with when they went after Jody Prine. Sol Sippy had not entered into his calculations, but the fat marshal had drawn first blood. Then there was this runty night hostler, all of a sudden gunned up. Langtry began to look around. He counted the fifteen men in the Cross 4 crowd more than enough to chase the whole of Little Amen into the Pecos in a showdown, only he wanted to know who was who.

Langtry regretted that Mainland had not been left free to force the play at Trifalgo's corner. It would have been fight or crawl, with no opportunity to drag it out. Again he saw that ridiculous round face in the thick of the melee.

"Reckon that marshal is holed in," Brat Konedig was saying.

"We'll dig 'im out," said Faber.

"Looks like Mainland is holed up too," Langtry said, his lids screwing down.

"Last I saw of him," Konedig said, "him an' that depperty was headed up Roswell towards the jail."

"Didn't anybody see them comin' back, did they?" Langtry said. "Pretty smart, but they ain't foolin' me."

Big Rince left the bar in the hotel and went out through the office, and in doing so he passed old man Foley, standing there twiddling the cylinder of an old Walker Colt. A cap-and-ball .44—a villainous

looking weapon that had seen much service.

Someone said, "What ye goin' to do with that thing?"

"Time will tell," old man Foley said mysteriously, rolling an eye at Big Rince. He stuck the gun in his belt and went out to the gallery.

Big Rince opened his mouth to say something, and shut it again. He went down the steps and joined Langtry and the others.

"I'm goin' to put two-three men on the jail," the Cross 4 ramrod was saying, "before it gets dark. Somebody is going to be takin' grub to the prisoner an' any other hombres who might be in there." He left the sentence there, letting his companions reach their own conclusions.

Down Pecos Street a little, and across, the door of Am Prouty's gun shop opened. Brat Konedig stopped in the middle of building a cigarette, his long jaw a-sag. "Hey!"

The exclamation turned attention toward the gun shop. Sol Sippy and Am Prouty had just come out, and Sol was carrying a sawed-off shotgun.

Am was a little hard of hearing and his voice was keyed accordingly. "Only gun in the world after dark. Can't miss."

Sol seemed pleased and kept bobbing his head. Finally he waddled off down the street, the gun cradled in the crook of his arm.

ABOUT the only sound in Little Amen was the voice of the Pecos, brawling along at the edge of town. Everybody was watching Sol, watching Langtry and the four or five Cross 4 men in front of the hotel.

Sol's bootheels patted the wet sidewalk planking, making small dents in this breathless intermission. He stopped in front of the drugstore, which was almost directly across from the Gran Posada, joggling his head at the folks.

"Nice after the shower." Sol looked over the shotgun at the group at the foot of the hotel steps.

The loungers by the drugstore moved out. They were in direct line if shooting started, and it didn't look good since Sol had indelicately notched Limpy Culp.

Big Rince Scaley's battered countenance was savage, his breathing was a mite wheezy. Whiskey had his courage up and he was primed for a shootout, but that shotgun disturbed him; a man couldn't do his best work looking at two loads of buckshot.

One of the men beside him rammed a six-shooter into his empty holster. "Get 'im, Rince!"

"I can't see so damn good," the segundo muttered uneasily.

"You'd better see good," Langtry snarled.

A passer-by had stopped to gape across at Sol and his shotgun and Big Rince moved a step or two to screen himself behind this man, his hand starting its sneak crawl for the gun handle.

Langtry's eye took a fast run along Pecos Street, sizing it up. Long Shorty and Scat Jones were standing near the feed yard head-frame at the lower end of the street, too far away to see what was shaping or to make a play when the shooting started. Langtry allowed himself a tight smile. Guns had won and held the Masquerades and the same quick-flaming guns were certain to cow Little Amen.

Something turned the ramrod's glance back toward the gun shop and he was surprised to see old Am Prouty standing there with a Sharps in his hand. Am was a striking figure, with his silver hair falling to his shoulders, but it was the single-shot buffalo gun that filled Langtry's eye.

Am, the cowman reflected, just might be readying to do some work on the Sharps, he was so slow and methodical, or he might turn out to be another hellion. Am squinted through the bore; then poked a cartridge into the chamber and took a trial sight down the street.

The Kansas City whiskey drummer had trailed old man Foley out to the gallery. He had seen a lot of trail towns, a lot of tough towns, and he felt the signs were right for a little shooting, although they had told him in Santa Fe that Little Amen was just like a graveyard, it was so peaceful.

When the drummer saw the fat man with the shotgun and the patriarch with the Sharps and old man Foley with the Walker Colt out, he said, "Judas wept!" And he went back into the hotel.

No one had ever quite plumbed old man Foley. He was a cantankerous customer and he was tighter, where money was concerned, than a wet wagon wheel, and if he

had a human spark, according to folks in Little Amen, it was dim and deep.

Somewhere someone was yelling, "Watch where you point that god-awful shotgun!" And the Cross 4 men saw then that Sol had both hammers of this weapon wide back, and they hastily spread their ranks. This surge of movement set off old man Foley and his high plaint ripped the street.

"Git away from here 'fore somebody shoots out my winders! Glass costs money!"

Perhaps old man Foley really meant it, or he might have been employing strategy. No one was certain about that, but the Walker roared and a ball whizzed past Langtry and punched up a geyser of mud in the street.

Langtry's hand had closed over the grips of his .45, he was that close to making a fight, but he checked the move and his voice was lifted in sudden command.

"Hold it! They set this one up, but next time it will be my turn to deal."

Sol Sippy slowly let the hammers of the shotgun down, his foolish pink face wreathed in a grin. The whole town, it seemed like, was milling around in Pecos Street, all talking at once. Everybody thought the marshal had been foolhardy.

Odd Ide had come up, all excited. "What got into ye to do a fool thing like that? Must be crazy."

"Kinda looks so, don't it?" Sol said, blinking his eyes.

CHAPTER THREE

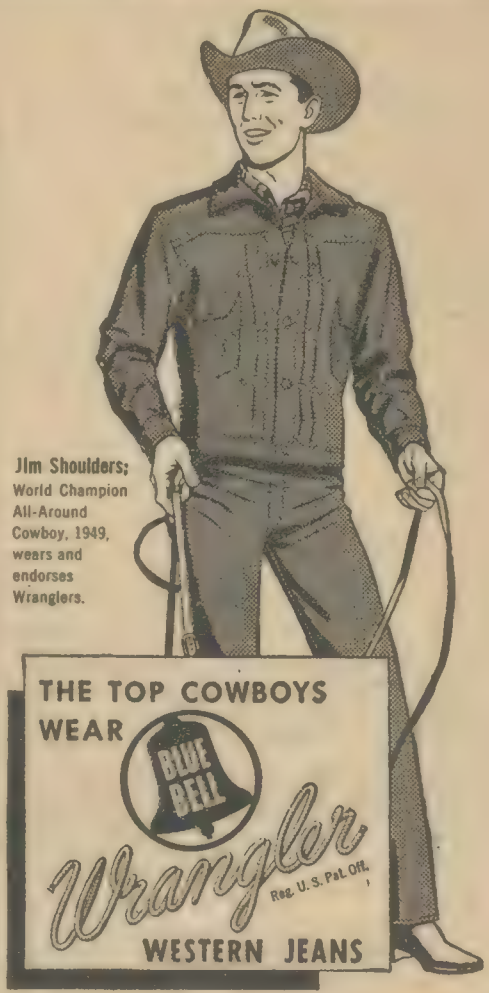
Owlhoot Citizens

THE sun fell away behind the mountain rims in the direction of Arizona Territory. Two or three high peaks caught fire, but soon the afterglow was gone and night was charging down.

Little Amen lost its shabby look and began putting on black velvet and jewels. Sol always liked it when the windows began to glow. It was a quiet time and a man could sit outside and think, listening to the old Pecos gurgling along under the river shelf, and look at the Big Dipper, riding its circle home.

Take now, just settin' here, plumb full of chicken 'n' dum'lin's, thinkin' on things.

Fat Sol Sippy thought about Mrs. Adam-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son, out there alone on the stark plains, and Lief, "camped" in the Masquerades, and Jody Prine. Jody was learning the hard way some of the things that Sol had found out in Texas long ago Jordan was a hard road to travel. as the song put it, but a man never could turn back. Come what might, he had to face up to it.

Sol watched the dark box-shape of the jail. Somebody had put out the lamp, and the small, high windows were like dim, sightless eyes in a pale face. Dark shapes moved there, the men Langtry had put on watch. Forms came and went in the muddy blackness, and now and then voices murmured in unseen places.

The warm bowl of Sol's pipe nestled in his hand and his lips made small contented noises as he puffed tobacco fragrance into the night. There wasn't another place like Little Amen anywhere, Sol thought. Trails had converged there at this river crossing, the trails of men wandering the face of the earth, doing penance for their sins. Back in Texas they would all have been in jail or dead of violence.

But here in the canyon beside the muddy Pecos they looked dreamily ahead at the bright tomorrows. It was good, and a man would, indeed, be an ingrate were he not willing to fight a little to preserve this freedom. Men like Langtry were evil. They put fear in the land and that was not right.

Things were high in The Border Saloon. Cross 4 money was rolling in and whiskey flowing. Sol heard the voices and the banging of the piano, going like mad. Sol saw two figures approaching along Roswell Street, one tall. Long Shorty, he reckoned, plenty worried about Mainland, and wiry Scat Jones.

Sol's voice reached out to them, soothing their jumpiness. "Mighty purty night, boys."

"I ain't enjoyin' it," said Long Shorty.

"The lid is off," the smaller man said, "an' she's just a question how soon the fat's in the fire."

"Look," Long Shorty said, "Mainland wouldn't be in that damn jail, would he?"

"No, no," Sol said. "I'm sure he ain't."

"Because them birds are fixin' to cave 'er in," Scat Jones said. "Yes, sir! An' they're goin' to hang the kid from the headframe at the feed yard, barrin' accident."

"Me an' Scat here," Long Shorty said, "an' ole Tote will be the accident, if we kin hack 'er."

TOTE, Sol knew, was the tracker who had been with the posse. "Three," Sol said. "Golly, that ain't many."

"Langtry's got fifteen anyhow," Scat said. "Gunfighters."

"Ye ain't countin' Limpy Culp, be ye?" Sol said.

"Fourteen then," Long Shorty said laconically. "Got three-four at the livery barn, seein' nobody gits gone, an' two-three ridin' herd on the calaboose. The rest are in the saloon."

"They got sledge hammers from the blacksmith shop," Scat said, "an' some new rope at Trifalgo's."

"I done hear he showed 'em how to tie a hangknot," Long Shorty said. "What the hell kind of folks is he?"

"Dan is good folks," Sol said. His lips made those contented noises again. "All good folks in Little Amen."

"Little Amen," Long Shorty said. "What they ever call it that for?"

"Some pilgrims from Texas," Sol said, "done figger it out, I hear."

There were small homey sounds inside —Mother putting away the supper dishes, setting things to rights, humming a bit now and then.

The square windows of the adobe were covered with some sort of bright-patterned material that gave privacy but let the lamplight through, lending warmth to the blackness and spreading little gold mats on the ground. Long Shorty, probing the shadows beyond a window, made out the shape of a gun across the fat man's knees.

Langtry was due to make his play most any time and Long Shorty felt the urgent need right now for greater wisdom than he possessed. Sol had proved up; he was a man to ride the river with.

"What yuh figger, Sol?" Long Shorty said. "Where yuh reckon we'll do the most good?"

Sol smiled to himself. How were the mighty fallen. Mainland and his men, proud as Lucifer when they rode through Little Amen earlier, suddenly awed by the guns of the Cross 4 and come down to earth and its little people.

"'Low right here," Sol said. "Under yore hats, amigos."

"Huh!" Scat grunted. "How come?"

"Good a place as any to die," Sol said.

"What the hell!" Long Shorty said.

"Couple pelados trailed ye up the street," Sol said. "Back there in the shadows com'ers."

"Yuh must be cat-eyed," Scat said, slanting an apprehensive look around.

"Texicans are born that way," Sol said. "Yup. An' owlhooters."

LANGTRY, the iron ramrod of the Masquerades, went into The Border Saloon and girded for battle. It took a little time to down the bitter pill Sol Sippy and old man Foley had forced on him, but Old Tommyhawk whiskey helped to remove the taste.

"I'm goin' to pistol-whip that fat gila monster into the mud an' kick his teeth in," the Cross 4 man said.

"Sure," Big Rince said, "you do that. But watch out, that's all I got to say."

Convinced Mainland was forted up in the jail with his chief deputy, Langtry presumed the strategy would be to deploy the three remaining members of the posse in positions where they could concentrate their fire on the Cross 4 men closing in for the attack. There would be a parley, of course, and the ramrod expected to make the sheriff see that his efforts to protect the prisoner were certain to be futile.

"Watch Long Shorty an' Scat Jones," Langtry told Faber and Konedig. "That's your job. One of you other birds keep an eye on that old tracker. Oh yes—an' a couple of you move a wagon in under that head-frame." He added, "An' put up that rope."

"Yuh know what I heard," Big Rince said, looking at the bartender.

"I'll bite," said the bartender.

"I heard a couple hours ago that this town was an owlhooters' heaven."

"Sounds plausible," said the saloonman.

Langtry said, "What the hell are you talkin' about?" But his eyes turned suddenly thoughful. He had only to glance back a page or two to find the picture of a scrawny man standing on the steps of Trifalgo's store stuffing cartridges into his gun belt.

Langtry smiled then, reasoning it out. Owlhooters? Men on the dodge, grown to fear and hate the law. What more reasonable to expect than that they would join a mob bent on smashing Mainland. If handled right, these men might be useful in future wars . . .

It had been full dark less than half an hour when Langtry took eight men up Roswell Street to the front of the jail. Two he left at the corner of Pecos Street and two at the livery barn.

The owner of the saloon, his bartender and the piano player went out to the gallery, leaving the saloon an empty cavern of odors. Movement up and down the street had quit. The doors were closed. Occasionally a figure crossed in front of a lighted window and bootheels rapped briskly, but that was all. The clock was stopped in Little Amen.

Hard against the jail door, Langtry said, "All right, Mainland, we know you're in there, and we're going to give you a chance to come out."

The jail gave no answer to that.

"We just want Jody Prine," Langtry said. "He's guilty of murder. Guilty as hell! An' we're goin' to swing him up. You ain't goin' to be stubborn, are you, Mainland?"

Big Rince said, "I can hear 'em in there. Don't none of you boys git out there where they can level on yuh."

Langtry said then, "All right, you had your chance, Mainland." Then, to his men: "Swing those mauls! Have that coal oil ready!"

The heavy door that Will Noddy had ironed so pridefully surrendered at last to the sledgehammers. It was splintered around the lock and swung inward violently. A Cross 4 rider standing to one side out of gun range lighted oil-soaked rags and tossed them through the doorway; another dashed a bucket of coal oil in and dodged back.

Flame puffed up and the whitewashed interior of the Little Amen jail, Sol Sippy's pride, was light as day. A half dozen shots were poured in and screaming lead battered the bars of the cells. And then, abruptly, the firing stopped. And there was only the wild laughter of the Pecos lifting against the night.

SOL SIPPY got up off the bench beside the adobe at the end of Roswell Street, watching the shadows alertly. Long Shorty

swung around and started for the jail, and gun-flame struck at him. The bullet snatched at his shirt. A second shot roared close beside the first, and Scat Jones was turned by the slug's impact.

A shotgun made up for a lot of things—the slowness of a fat man, bad aiming, the difficulty of getting on the target in the dark. A shotgun sure was a plumb fine equalizer.

Brat Konedig was the closest and the load of buckshot caught him squarely. He dropped, kicked a little, then was still. Seam Faber fell and set up a soggy moaning.

Somewhere someone was screaming, "Jail break!" Men were cursing; a few were laughing. One was Borders, the saloon owner. It tickled him to hear the pair of Cross 4 men in front of Trifalgo's yelling when old man Foley and Dan stuck guns in their ribs and ordered them to shuck their hardware.

At the feed yard two more of Langtry's hands were caught under the hard stare of six-shooters in the hands of Odd Ide, Jim Suggs and this tracker with the posse, old Tote.

"Shall we gut-shoot 'em?" Odd said. "Or hang 'em?"

"Let 'em go," Jim said, "but if they ever come back we'll fix fer 'em to dance a leetle."

These two were happy to go, and they quickly geared up.

"Called us 'bloodthirsty hellions!'" said Odd Ide with a snicker.

"Could be," Jim Suggs said.

Where Mainland came from Teck Langtry never knew, but the sheriff was there, driving lead at this hang-mob, and his head deputy was beside him. Bide Mainland was a tough man when the cards were all on the table and he didn't have to brace a bushwhack game.

Big Rince was through. They said he was soft on the underside. He had looked at too many guns and he had seen Limpy Culp die. He threw down his six-shooter when he saw Sol Sippy coming up into the thin rim of light flickering from the door of the jail. The little fat man had been the joker in every deal. The shotgun had made the segundo's stomach crawl back there on Pecos Street; it still did.

Remembering Langtry's pistol-whipping threats in Borders', and with some sort of twisted mentality, Big Rince yelled at the Cross 4 ramrod. "Here's yore man!"

Langtry whirled and saw Sol waddling up to these crazily dancing shadows. His eyes were stupidly full of those black muzzles and his nerve was turning ragged. He fired while he was still off balance, still having trouble with that uncertain footing. But Sol kept coming, and he spoke to Langtry, telling him something in all of this roaring tempest.

The shotgun loads had been spent, paying off part of the score for Lief Adamson.

"Tain't loaded!" Sol told Langtry, and flung the shotgun at him.

Langtry flailed at it with his left arm, warding it off, at the same time trying to ear back the hammer of his six-shooter again. Sol brought the .44 from the worn holster—his own gun, the gun that had been his pard back in those smoky days in Texas. He brought it up, slow and easy, the long hammer-piece under his chubby thumb, and looked at the third button down on Langtry's vest.

Langtry seemed to know that he couldn't win. Too many hands today that a hole card couldn't fill. The kingdom of the Masquerades was oozing right through his fingers. Langtry saw the muzzle blast, saw the great white flame of a new world, of a new range, roaring down.

LITTLE AMEN gathered up the pieces with satisfaction. Langtry, Brat Konedig and another Cross 4 gunrider went on to side Limpy Culp in the new land where he had gone. Seam Faber lingered, not quite making up his mind. Scat Jones had a hole in his shoulder, considered a mere blemish compared with the damage generally accomplished.

Cross 4 men, the scattering from the 7 Y and the Doodle-Bug, with Big Rince heading them, hit for the livery barn and started a fast gearing up. The wagon was dragged from beneath the head-frame, with the dangling hangnoose left, an outline against the sky.

"Life is a problem," Odd Ide told Big Rince.

The segundo cursed him, cursed the nervous horse as he tried to throw the rig on.

Things were beginning to quiet down

when someone thought to ask about the jail delivery.

"It wasn't exactly a jail delivery," Sol said. "Folks got to eat. Figgered the easiest way was to let the sher'f an' his man taken Jody over to the house. So's there wouldn't be no serious complications, me an' Am Prouty an' Foley fixed to put on a leetle wingding. That-away, we 'lowed everybody would be watchin' the rayfus an' not payin' no 'tention to the calaboose."

"You hombres was sure hossin' around with sudden death," somebody said.

"Mebbe," Sol said, "but there was Jody in a tight." He went on, "Mother went an' let the folks out of the pokey; then locked 'er up ag'in."

One of the group in front of the hotel asked about Jody. "We sneaked him in the back door of the hotel after dark, just to play it safe," Mainland said, "and Foley hid him out."

Long Shorty let his breath out slowly. "I could stand a drink," he said.

"We'll have a drink on the house," Trifalgo said.

"No ye don't!" yelled old man Foley. "Not a smell until the dinero is paid!"

"The drinks are on me," Mainland said, and he gave Sol a straight look.

The sheriff studied them, there in the backbar mirror. Big pock-marked Dan Trifalgo, Odd Ide, Jim Suggs, old man Foley—Sol Sippy. Solid citizens of Little Amen. Mainland's rocky features traced out a small smile. He hated to think what would happen to some of them back in Texas, but that was back in Texas.

The talk turned to Ma Adamson, about her going home to the Masquerades—and Lief Jody, Mainland said, would have to go to Tecate to stand trial.

"That's how it is with the law, but after the kid tells his story no jury will convict him."

Mainland went on, "And if there is anything I can do for you gentleman, let me know."

"Well, I tell ye," Sol said, "if ye ever hear about some Texas hombres that crossed the line in a hurry you let on like they're willin' to let bygones be bygones."

THE END

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A ROPE'S AN UGLY THING

By VAN CORT

How long can a man ride under another man's brand and still keep his honor? Just about as long, Bill Denvers figured, as the stretch of a rope between a nester's neck and the gallows.

THE eyes of all men in the crowded square of Sundance Town rested on Bill Denvers, Winfield Herrick's ranch manager, as he stood on the courthouse steps and cursed the sight of George Mack's horse at the Slater House rail opposite.

Slater House, with its white-painted

A red flash exploded at him. . . .

three-story front, its Cattleman's Bank at one end and the bar and grill at the other, was a landmark which overshadowed the courthouse. Denvers, leaving the courthouse steps and striding toward the Slater, his face set, reflected bitterly about George Mack: You might know a man all your life; laugh and drink with him, ride stirrup to stirrup, and then, out of a clear sky, something like this would happen. He still couldn't believe it.

It was all because Winfield Herrick had decided to ride his lines hard to get rid of the nesters and other alleged thieves who had taken to crowding his government grazing.

It had been on Denvers' order that Kelsey had been sent to stake out a water rights claim to the Collins homestead. Kelsey, a bully, had made a field day of it by walking into the Collins shack, overturning the cook stove to drive his stake.

The homesteader, usually a mild man, saw red when his poor dinner went on the floor and his kids cried in fright. He went wild and knocked Kelsey down. In the fight over possession of the rider's gun, Kelsey's head hit the stove. The blow killed him.

Denvers cursed again. Here was Sundance now, filled to overflowing with a divided trial crowd, to settle an issue bigger than whether a man was to hang for murder. Who'd have thought there were that many nester settlers in the country?

Collins, in his fear of the Double H riders' revenge, had fled to George Mack's horse ranch, and George had taken him in and seen to it that he was arrested and accorded a trial.

Willis and Hogan, Kelsey's closest bunkmates, loitered by the lobby door. They were small tight-built men, older than their ages and with the stubborn thirst for revenge of their kind darkening their expressions. Willis dropped and squashed a butt on the plank floor as Denvers passed him. "How goes it over there?"

"Old Syverson's still jawing at the jury," Denvers said. "And I mean jawing."

Inside the lobby he was at once aware of Edna Slater behind the tall room desk by the stairs, making a pretense at going over her books. The dark mood of this day was reflected in her worried greeting. "Hello, Bill."

Seeing Edna he was always brought back to schooldays at the little red house just outside town, and Winfield and George Mack and himself all being in love with her and pining for her and Winfield as usual having the best of it, as he always got the best of everything. As they grew older some pretty wild whispers had had their run about Win and Edna, but they had never married. And here she was now, anyhow twenty-seven or eight, still not married and still running her father's hotel, five years after his death.

He said, "How are you, Ed," but got a sick smile in return. She was aware of George Mack's presence in the bar. "Now, now," Denvers said. "Cheer up. Worse is yet to come."

"I hope not, Bill," the girl said slowly.

He shrugged. Women never understood. "I'll see you later, Ed," he said then. "You'll have to excuse me," and went into the bar.

George Mack looked up from a table by the window. "Saw you coming, Bill," he said and pointed to two fresh-headed glasses of beer. "Sit down and cool off."

Denvers stood by the table, trying to penetrate the void between them, staring across the years. There was a hidden steel core in George Mack which he had not known about. He kicked a chair loose and sat down on its edge. "You could have stayed home."

Mack's black brows rose. "It's court day, isn't it?"

"You did your bit for Collins; you got him his trial. You could at least have stayed out of this."

"As a special favor to you, Bill? Or because you happen to ride for the great Win Herrick?"

"Let's keep Win out of it."

MACK said flatly, "There's a lot of things I wish I could have kept Win out of." He lifted his glass. "Bill, you're a furrow-minded fool. Drink your beer."

Denvers did not drink. "Don't know what to make of you, George."

"I haven't changed, Bill. I never did think that Win, or you, or the others, or the cattle business, was Godallmighty and I don't now. Collins wasn't armed. A rope is an ugly thing to put around a man's neck for defending his home."

Denvers stood up and stared down at the

other man. "You mean you don't intend to abide by a verdict then?"

Mack smiled patiently. "Now, Bill, you mean *you* don't, if it goes against you. The shoe's on the other foot."

Denvers reddened slightly, bit his lip. "Well, that's all then." And he turned on his heel and went out. . . .

In the square once more, Denvers saw at once that the verdict had at last come. Men boiled out of the courthouse as others surged around them to get details. There was a stir and murmur among the farmers. And now Winfield Herrick, face set and eyes blazing, cut a path through the crowd with Ernest Overmile at his side. Herrick, tall, flare-shouldered, carried a constant air of contemptuous superiority; his sparkling brown eyes challenged the world to dare question his rights.

Denvers said, "They found for him then?"

Overmile spat, "Too many townsmen on the jury. Nesting rag-tag and bobtail . . . you heard Syverson tell them about doubts in their minds; whether Collins had any rights. Well, they swallowed it!"

When they were nearly back at the Slater bar door Denvers said, "George is in there," and it stopped Herrick for a moment; he looked quickly and sharply at Denvers.

Overmile lifted his voice for the benefit of the crowd. "If we don't give it to them now, and make it stick, things will never be the same around here. A man will never know where his range runs!"

Rifle butts were sticking from saddle scabbards today, but there were also shotguns and rifles hidden in the many wagons and buggies belonging to the farmer and homesteader crowd on the other side of the square, which still waited tensely for Collins' appearance.

The three men, after a glance across, swung into the bar, joining Breckinridge, already there. The bartender set four ponies on the mahogany, filling them with Herrick's bourbon.

The four men eyed one another briefly, then drank off in unison, somehow making a ritual of this. They stood together, the three biggest ranchers, and Bill Denvers, Herrick's manager, representing what this cattle empire had been for a long time. They'd shed blood to keep it that way—and damn the rest of the whole, wide world.

Herrick said pointedly, "Bill, we want as little fuss about this as possible—but we've got to give Collins the rope."

Silence came after that; a silence suddenly cut by George Mack's voice. "Just a minute, Win! You're climbing a pretty tall horse there!"

Herrick stiffly finished his second drink and then turned as if noticing Mack for the first time.

"Not too tall, George."

Mack said sharply, "The jury found for him, Win! Why, hell and damnation, he shouldn't even have been indicted. It was self-defense! The law did you a courtesy trying him at all."

Small quick lines came and went along Herrick's jaw muscles. He snarled across at the man who had always refused to pay proper homage to his authority, "Do tell! So much for your stinking jury."

George shook his head. "Don't take Tim out of that court and hang him, Win. I'll shoot the first man who tries."

"You'll have your chance, George!"

It had never been this open before; it rocked the men in this room back on their heels, took their breath.

Mack got to his feet. "All right, Win. Open the ball any time you like."

HERRICK stood alone now, with only Bill Denvers quite close. And yet the moment kept hanging fire till Herrick's stiff lips moved with contempt. "In my own good time, George. In my own good time."

So it died, and George Mack walked deliberately toward the door, his back and shoulders mocking them and their power, and making a fine target before he swung the gallery door open and brushed through the Double H riders outside and ducked under the rail.

They saw him yank the tie-rein of his horse and mount calmly as if the whole affair concerned nothing more than a glass of beer. As he reached the courthouse, Harold Tomey, his hired hand, drove up before the steps in a buckboard, behind a pair of long-legged reds. Now Tim Collins, a tall, skinny, too-sallow man with a young face, came hastily out of the door and on down. His eyes swept the square.

George Mack gestured from the saddle, Collins climbed the wheel of the buckboard

and it started at once, Mack keeping pace alongside it. Not till they were opposite Dolson's bakery at the end of the street did Tomey slack the reins and let the reds run. But then, in a moment, the three men were gone from sight.

As Denvers turned in the door to face the three men, Overmile burst out: "Well, what in hell are we waiting for? After them!"

Herrick was watching Denvers angrily, and Denvers, somehow feeling that his friendship for George had caused this, said, trying to save appearance, "Win, let me handle this my way. Let me handle George."

And Herrick at once accepted that with a stern: "Damn it, maybe you ought to, Bill."

"Pick the men you want," advised Breckenridge, "and I'll circle the hills with a bunch. They won't get away; we'll see to that." He drained his glass and the three men marched out of the bar, through the lobby, leaving Denvers suddenly alone, with the Double H riders waiting on the gallery outside for his word.

As he finished his own drink before leaving, Denvers heard Edna Slater's voice halt Herrick in the lobby. "Win, Win! Can't you drop this thing? It was a fair trial. For God's sake let it go at that and don't do anything you'll regret."

Win's voice was purposely deep and pleasant and a little patronizing. "I didn't see you there by the desk, Ed. That *is* a pretty dress; clear from Frisco or I miss my guess . . ." And he added in a darker tone, "No, Edna, if I *didn't* do something I'd regret it. You'll excuse me, won't you." And his footfalls took him out of the lobby after the others.

Denvers lingered at the bar staring at the full and flat glass of beer still on George's table. "Bill," said Edna suddenly, and he looked up and saw her inside the lobby door. "Bill, you're not going after Collins, are you?"

Even owning the place, she had no business here, and talking like this. But there it was.

"Let's not discuss it, Ed," he said softly. "There's no way around it." And he thought, If she couldn't stop Win, how could she stop me? But something in her attitude stirred him.

She said breathlessly, "Ever think of the fact that the country must change sometime, Bill?"

"I don't care for that kind of change."

"In my dad's and Old Herrick's day it was different. They were tough men because they had to be. The country was big and raw; they took it from the Indians because they had to take it, whether that was right or wrong. But now more people, people of their own kind, are coming onto the land; people the land must feed. They have to live too."

"Not by stealing from us," he said stubbornly. The men were waiting for him silently out there, but waiting. The horses stirred.

Her vehemence astonished him. "When I was a little girl they used to hang rustlers and horse thieves from the crosspole of Dekker's gate over there! I saw it twice, though dad tried to keep me from it. They were quick to it. Once the man was innocent, Bill! I don't like a rope around a man's neck. It's an ugly thing. . . . !"

Her chance repetition of Mack's words hit him. She went on, "It's an old, old

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gate. Fail on this job, Bill. You'll be a bigger man for it. Maybe this is your chance. Don't miss it!"

Whatever did she mean? She was churning everything upside down within him, but the long years of futile wishing for her while her name was linked with Herrick's, were bitter scales on his soul. He picked up his hat. "Whoa now, Ed. You're out of your territory. I know my saddle."

"Do you, Bill? Do you?" Her voice and presence followed him, putting their persistent hooks into him. Then the batwings slapped shut after him and he tramped across the gallery, beckoning curtly to the men he wanted with him; but deep in him now was a sick prayer that Collins would not be at George's.

But Edna Slater rode in spirit with him on this afternoon's fatal journey to the horse ranch. Besides Willis and Hogan Denvers had only taken three other men; the rest were circling the hills already. This job of getting Collins from Mack was *his*.

THEY reached the corral-cluttered yard area about the ranch after two hours' hard riding and saw at once a wagon, piled with household goods, which must be Collins's. Denvers cursed and chewed on the lining of his cheek till he tasted blood. The fools! This would be a nasty business then, taking a man from his family.

He reined up, halting the others with a sign. The thin column of smoke rising from the stone chimney painted a listless pattern of peace and quiet which was deceptive. The gray line stood eerie and unreal against the sandy browns and dark greens of the Tornadoes behind it. All was still. On the gallery yonder Denvers had sat many a night, talking and drinking quietly. He said gruffly, "Watch for a bushwhack. Keep on the alert," and rode forward.

He hailed the house several times and got for an echo each time only the sharp rapping of his own heart against his ribs. His past visits to this place were too sharp in his memory and but for the men behind him he would have turned around after the fifth hail.

But now George Mack came out on the gallery, smoking a pipe. A peculiar calm was about him and in the darkness of the gallery roof he looked pale. He seemed to see only Bill and after a long spell he said in a queer, flat voice, "Well, step out of leather, Bill."

Denvers said with difficulty, "I guess not this time, George," knowing abruptly that there would never be another time. "You know what we're after. Tell him to come out here without making trouble. You've done enough. He ought to see that."

A sigh went out of Mack. "Bill, you ought to know I stand behind anybody I ask into my house. You . . . or anybody else."

"George, you shouldn't have put me in this position. We want Collins, and that's whatever."

George Mack then knocked his pipe empty against the gallery post. "Turn your horse around and ride out of here, Bill! Forget you came like this . . . and I'll forget it."

"Quit this jawing," Hogan called. "Get Collins out here or we'll make you eat your brag! You've made enough as it is!"

Denvers waved a hand, quieting the man. But there was no turning back now. He slid slowly from the saddle and moved forward, trying to handle this thing by utter casualness. Behind him Willis and Hogan however, had their hands on the hip guns and one of the other riders was swinging his rifle.

"It's no use, George," he said slowly. "You know we have to get Collins. You'll have to see it my way. Move aside, you fool." He put a gentle, weary patience into his tone.

A peculiar cry came into Mack's voice then. "For the last time, Bill! Don't come to my house this way!" His left hand reached out warningly as if to stop Denvers, his right poised over his revolver.

Instinctively Denvers' own hand rose to his gun, and as their eyes met these two stared at each other like strangers, like men who should know each other but suddenly couldn't.

"I mean it!" The gun came half out of Mack's holster.

Willis and Hogan fired from their saddles. George Mack jerked erect and then sat clumsily down on the gallery steps, the gun falling from his hand. The rider who had reached for the rifle sent a nervous shot at a window. The glass fell in ringing shards to the gallery planks, then all was

abruptly still. The riders watched silently.

Denvers stood open-mouthed over Mack, who leaned against the post. His own gun was unfired. "George," he said. "George . . ."

Color had gone from Mack's face; little pink bubbles showed on his lips. "Bill," he said laboriously, "you're a fool . . . never meant to fire on you. . . . A man's home, though . . . too bad . . . for you, Bill. . . ." He sank back on the floor, his legs hanging grotesquely over the steps; and he became still, suddenly, quietly, irrevocably.

Denvers reeled forward then and had to shift his weight to keep his balance. Hogan and Willis came up behind him and Denvers said, "Who asked you to open up? Who asked you to open up?"

"He was *your* friend," said Willis. "We figured you'd rather—"

Hogan, gun drawn, advanced up the steps and kicked open the door. They heard him inside; then he was back, mouth open, consternation all over his face. "Collins ain't here. Nobody's here. There ain't nobody here at all!"

Willis' jaw fell slack. He looked from one to the other; to the dead man. "Then why the hell . . . why the hell at all?" He was shaking.

HOGAN kept talking, "I have it now. They left the stuff in the wagon for a decoy. It was for George here to stall us. Probably hit the trail behind the house for the pass."

Bill Denvers bit his lips and tasted blood. Hogan kept on talking: "We best be after them; shouldn't have much trouble catching up. There's scraps of a meal in there. Let's go."

Denvers suddenly found his voice again. "You two," he said to Willis and Hogan. "Find a wagon and hitch it up. We'll be taking him to town."

"We'll put him in the house for now," said Willis uneasily. "Somebody can come for him later. Collins'll get away."

Denvers took his eyes from George Mack at last and drove his glance to the men. "We're taking him to town. He'll get a proper burial."

The youngster who had fired the rifle at the window, said, "That's okay, but first we got to get Collins. That's what we came for, ain't it?"

Denvers gave him a dead, blue stare and the other's jaw fell open, and he said hastily, "Okay, okay, Bill. Anything you say." None of them knew him now.

As they went about hitching, and as Mack's body was lifted into the wagon bed and a tarp put over him, Denvers didn't stir from the spot. He had lost his bearings. The ground seemed to have slipped from under him. He found it was no use to call George a fool and to try to tell himself that he did not understand why his friend had defended that empty house. He *knew;* he knew only too clearly, and it made him feel that his own entire life had been wasted.

Finally, lost, as if in a trance, he slowly mounted his horse and rode after the wagon.

* * *

Old Doctor Wells was also the coroner, and they pulled the wagon from the back way into the alley next to his office. In the backroom stood a trestle table and Hogan and Willis carried the body in there, looked swiftly at each other and left.

Denvers was standing at the feet when Wells, hearing the shuffle of boots, poked his head in from the hall near his office where he was treating a patient. He came in then and closed the door behind him. He was a short, stocky man with a weather-brown face and snow-white close-cropped mustache. "Well, Bill, and what have we here?"

A little silence ran on. "Uh-huh," said Wells. "Here's a good man with a .45 slug in him that won't have to come out. Uh-huh. Never did care much for Mr. Colt's little invention myself. Makes big men out of little boys, or little boys out of big men. . . ." He paused before he said, "Your handiwork, Bill?"

The two words came out of Denvers, hard-breathed in the little room: "I guess."

The silence pounded on heavily. "Uh-huh, uh-huh," Wells said then and walked quickly up and down on his short legs, stopping and looking at the stiff, still figure standing at the feet of the dead man. "Well, it's done, it's done. I suppose a man who takes on a job knows what he's doing . . ." He paused again, then said, mostly to himself, "Funny, I brought you both into the world. . . . Come a long ways, haven't we? I'll tell you, you try whiskey; but if

you find you can't sleep at all, come to me and I'll give you something. Beyond that only God can help you." He was at the door, and nodding toward the corpse. "All right, Bill, I'll take care of him. Just put that sheet over him before you go . . ." And he left.

THE alley was empty when Denvers came out, and he stood for a while, staring at the wheel tracks in the sandy ground, trying to tell himself that he actually *had* brought George to town, dead; that he actually lay in there on that table. Then he left his horse and walked down the street to Sullivan's saloon.

In Sullivan's, talk dampened and froze at either end of the bar. Men looked at him furtively over their shoulders, leaving him in this sudden world of his own, and he ignored them as they wanted to be ignored. At the clear space near the middle of the bar he looked at Dan Sullivan himself. "Whiskey, Dan," he said.

It looked for a moment as if the saloon man did not know whether he wanted to serve or not, then something akin to pity came into his eyes and he set up the bottle. Denvers poured three fingers into the tumbler and drained the liquor off. Throat and stomach were wooden; the whiskey had no more effect than water. He turned the bottle in his hand.

He and George had been drunk in here one night, and George had had to go outside for a minute and hadn't come back. When Bill went after him he had found him standing between two buckboard poles in Lawson's freightyard next door, unable to find his way out. They had laughed, and he heard now his own and George's laughter of long ago . . . and he knew suddenly that he would never sleep again, not if he took all Doc Wells' pills. He paid and left, leaving easier breathing behind him.

He was at Slater House then, swinging in through the bar door to be again among people, yet utterly alone. Sam Badgely, the bartender, was merely a face behind a bottle. Denvers poured three fingers and drank it off and again liquor was like water. He felt a slight dizziness, a thickness about the head, but the thing that had happened was a sharply-etched picture in the center of his mind, which he could not escape. He turned from this bar too, this thing of forgetfulness for others, but not for him, and saw that everybody had quietly walked out—all except Win Herrick and Ernest Overmile.

The two men were staring at him cautiously. Herrick's expression was still haughtily angry. He said, "Tough luck, Bill. Too bad—and Collins got away."

Speechless, Denvers stared at him, and Overmile, taking a wrong cue from Herrick's words, said, "Yes, Bill, that was a clumsy business. We send you out to get one man, you lose him and kill an entirely wrong man." And he added, "You've made us look like a bunch of fools."

"Fools!" The cry of rage came deep from Denvers' throat. "So I made fools of *you!*" He sprang forward and his fist connected like a ram with the side of Overmile's jaw. The rancher went down and lay, knocked out, against the footrail. Herrick stepped back, pale. "You're drunk; you're beside yourself; we'll overlook this. Go home and sleep it off."

Denvers shook his head vaguely. It was no use blaming others. The guilt was his. He wheeled slowly and walked out.

He was aware that Edna was still by her desk, and he stopped there tall, stiff and solid, a man carrying all the outward signs of self-possession, but with a dead look in his eyes, and leaned on her desk, his hands suddenly having to carry his weight.

Color left his face at her look of regret and disbelief; the fogs of intoxication should shroud his brain, but this was another thing which was torturingly clear: There was now a black gulf between them which he would never be able to span.

"Still here, still at your desk," he remarked inanely. He saw her now as so utterly desirable, embodying all he had ever dreamed of from the schooldays on, through his years-long frustration at seeing Win having her, that he cursed himself for never having made his own bid for her. But he had been Win's man, the Double H's man, the ruthless regent of a cattle empire, and again he realized that it had been a wasted life, that he had ridden someone else's saddle when he should have been riding his own.

"I wish I *hadn't* been here all day," she said harshly. "I wish I hadn't. I should have got my horse and followed you, yes, and used a gun on that stupid, thick skull

of yours, if nothing else would penetrate it."

"I wish you had," he said flatly. There was no rest and no sleep for him ever, and whiskey would not help. North of town a trail ran toward Bear Ridge, passing above the woods, a flat bench with a clump of cottonwoods at its west end.

He saw himself sitting his horse under the biggest tree, uncoiling his rope and running it through his hands as he measured the throw to the heaviest limb above. A gun was too quick, too easy. A rope was what they would have used on Collins. There was no reasoning in him now.

"Bill, Bill, how could you?" she said. "I never actually believed that you . . ."

"Well, it's done," he said savagely in farewell and got ready to turn away.

"Then what are you going to do about it?"

"What is there to do about it? How can anything ever be set to rights now?"

"George stood up for a principle," she said bitterly. "Do you know what a principle is? All you know is the great Double H."

"Leave me alone," he said. "Never mention the Double H to me again."

"Too late," she called after him. "A little too late."

FROM the doorway he looked back at her for a last time. She had buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders were shaking. Was it George then she had really loved? Double guilt sickened and weakened him. He recalled the rank and smouldering enmity forever under the surface between Winfield and George. Win had blustered and forced his handsome way and had gotten everything, as he always did, while he . . . and George . . . He shook his head and turned out into the dark.

As he found his horse, still in Doc Wells' alley, he stood still momentarily and remembered her scorching answer to his remark earlier in the day. That he knew his saddle, "Do you, Bill? Do you?"

In the semi-darkness he lingered with his hand on the saddle-horn, trying to make up his mind to foot stirrup.

A voice said then, from the back end of the alley: "Is that you, Denvers?"

He wheeled from the horse and saw a figure outlined in the thin moonlight. "What is it?" he asked. The tone had been desperate and high-strung; the shape was gaunt, slightly-crouched, hatless; and he saw then too late that the caller held a pistol poised.

A red flash exploded at him, its report crashing against his ears and a jolt tearing at his shoulder, staggering him, spinning him slowly. He went to one knee, stumbling against the horse's forelegs before he got his own gun free and answered the fire. With the animal rearing and complaining and backing against Doc Wells' house wall, his two shots went wild. The assailant fired twice more, then waited squarely in the center of the alleyway, the gun still poised, the moonlight making a neat target of him.

"Get to your feet, Denvers, if you can!"

Denvers sat against the Wells backdoor step, shaking his head to clear his faculties. He could easily lift his gun and shoot on the rise and hit that target. He had all the time in the world; but nausea suddenly brought gall to his mouth. As he slowly blacked out, someone brought a lamp to an upper window in a house on the other side of the alley, there was a roar and clatter

(Please turn to page 110)

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To Black John, Yukon justice meant taking from the outlaws to give to those who deserved the most. Naturally, he couldn't think of anybody more deserving than a gent named Smith, front handle: Black John!

CHAPTER ONE

Solomon of Half-a-Day Creek

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, combined trading post and saloon that served the little community on Half-a-day Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, folded his newspaper and placed it on the back-bar. Then, without haste, he took up a bottle, two glasses and the leather dice box as Black John Smith stepped into the room and up to the bar. Old Cush won the drinks, made the proper entry in his day book and faced the big man who was filling his glass from the bottle.

"It looks to me," he began, as he filled his own glass, "like the world's goin' to be in a hell of a fix if the damn' doctors don't quit inventin' new kinds of medicine to cure folks of what they've got, an' then turnin' around an' inventin' new ways of keepin' 'em from ketchin' somethin' else."

Black John grinned. "I don't quite follow your line of thought, if any. It looks to me like the world is better off every time

A glance at the unwavering rifle muzzle decided him against trying anything....

BLACK JOHN'S BEAR TRAP TROUBLE

A Frozen North
Novelette by
JAMES B. HENDRYX

the doctors find out how to cure a disease or to prevent folks from catching one."

"Maybe you're right," said Cush, "but I ain't sold on medicine."

"I wouldn't lose no sleep over it, if I was you, Cush." The big man grinned and turned toward the door which had opened on a parka-clad figure. As the newcomer advanced he threw back the parka hood to reveal a cascade of silver hair. "Well, Father Cassatt, in person!" Black John said. "Welcome to Half-a-day! Step right over by the stove an' peel off your parka while I fetch you a drink." He called to One-Armed John who was puttering about in the storeroom, "Go out an' look after Father Cassatt's dogs an' I'll buy you a drink, too."

The priest smiled. "A dram of liquor works wonders in driving the chill from an old man's bones. It is growing colder. I am thankful to have reached this haven."

"Where you headin', Father?" the big man asked.

"I am on my way to Dawson to consult with Corporal Downey."

"Someone be'n botherin' yer Siwashes?"

"Yes, a bad man. A very bad man. He is a half-breed—Louis Harp—the bastard son of Pierre Harp, a French free trader who, years ago, built a cabin and lived on a creek not far from my mission. Despite all I could do to prevent it, a young woman of my people went to live with him there, and in due course a son was born to her. Shortly thereafter Pierre Harp disappeared, and the young woman returned with the infant to her people. She did not live long and the child was raised by her parents. He attended my school at the mission, and was by far the smartest of all my pupils.

"But he was ever a wayward lad—a scoffer and a blasphemer. While still in his teens he forsook the abode of his grandparents, repaired to the deserted cabin of his father and shortly became the best trapper among all the Indians. Then, while still a young man, he disappeared.

"For a number of years thereafter I would hear rumors of him. He worked as a whaler . . . he became a notorious gambler . . . he traded liquor to the Indians along the Koyukuk . . . he killed a man over a card game at Nulato. Then he hit for the outside but got no farther than Skagway, where he became an habitue of the saloons, the gaming houses and the brothels.

"Then, early in the autumn, Louis Harp reappeared in the Feather Creek country as suddenly as he had disappeared, and has again taken up his abode in the cabin of his father. Ostensibly he is trapping, but I have noticed of late that my people have been obtaining liquor. I have, as yet, no direct evidence that he is supplying this liquor. But I am morally certain of it, because until his return my people have had no liquor since the time you so effectively rid the country of those two malefactors who were cheating them out of their treaty money.

"I WENT to him and remonstrated, but he laughed at me, and assured me he was merely trapping. He has added a log addition to his cabin and this room is already half filled with fur. When I accused him of obtaining this fur from the Indians in exchange for liquor, he assured me that I was wrong—that he himself had trapped it all. But this is manifestly untrue, for no man could trap that much fur in the time that has elapsed since his return."

"Where do you figure he's gettin' the hooch from," Black John asked.

"I suspect that he obtains it from Cutter Malone. I know he is a friend of Malone, and it has been my experience that any friend of Malone is open to suspicion."

"There's no question about that," Black John Smith agreed. "Cutter's as ornery as they make 'em."

"Day before yesterday," the little priest continued, "I saw Louis Harp swing his dog outfit onto the river and head downstream, so I decided to go myself to Dawson and lay the matter before Corporal Downey."

"You say the breed has traded your Siwashes out of half a roomful of fur. He's prob'ly takin' a big sledload of it down to Dawson to buy more hooch with."

"No. His sled was empty. He was running light."

"This room where he keeps the fur, is it stout built?"

"Yes. It is strongly constructed of logs and the door is secured by means of a huge padlock."

Black John smiled. "Considerin' your problem from the viewp'int of an innocent

bystander, it don't look so tough. If I was you I'd forget this trip to Dawson. You can stop overnight with me, an' in the mornin' you can hit back to Feather Crick an' pick out half a dozen husky Siwashes an' have 'em fetch along an ax, an' either knock off that padlock or chop out part of a wall, an' reclaim the fur. Then when the breed gets back with another load of hooch he'll find out that his tradin' venture ain't showin' a profit. What with you havin' a bunch of Siwashes, an' only one of him, the odds wouldn't look right for him to stage a reprisal."

The priest shook his head. "No, John, while your suggestion might well be a practical solution of the problem, I cannot consider it. I have labored for years among my people in an endeavor to instill the virtues of honesty, sobriety and truth into their hearts. The fact that Louis Harp has caused many of them to stray from the path of sobriety cannot justify my advising them to also stray from the path of honesty. Despite the methods he used in obtaining the fur, it is his property now, and the plan you propose is nothing short of burglary. And I could not for a moment condone it."

Black John Smith's smile widened. "Well, of course, Father, when it comes right down to splittin' theological hairs, I'll admit that you'd use a razor where I'd use an ax. But I maintain that the good old practice of fightin' fire with fire still works."

BEHIND the bar Cush nodded emphatically. "John's right, Father. It would serve the damn cuss right. I ain't no priest. But if I was one I wouldn't give a damn what my Siwashes done to a hooch-trader, jest so they done it damned thorough."

"Two wrongs cannot make a right. I appreciate the sympathy of you men, but I must turn a deaf ear to your advice. I cannot condone a violation of ethics as a means to an end, no matter how propitious that end might be."

Cush shrugged. "Huh—John, he's allus talkin' about these here ethics, an' claimin' how he's got 'em. An' now you claim that what he told you to do would be agin ethics. If he's got ethics, an' you've got 'em, an' he claims it's all right to rob a hooch-runner, an' you claim it ain't, how do you figger that out? It looks to me like them ethics ain't worth a damn no ways you look at 'em."

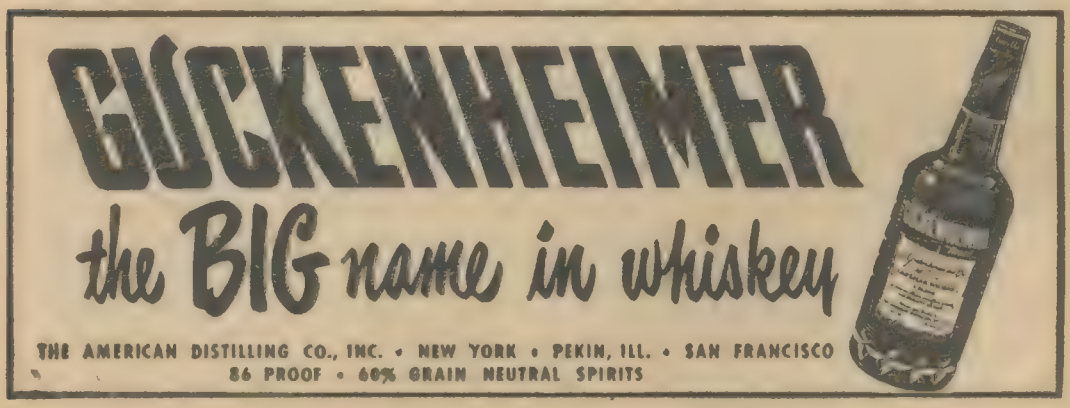
Black John regarded the speaker loftily. "The apparent discrepancy in viewp'int is easily explained. As you say, both Father Cassatt and I adhere to a code of ethics. The explanation is that the good father's code is not as flexible as mine." He turned to the priest. "Ain't that so, Father?"

The little priest smiled. "Ethical flexability is a remarkable concept, to say the least, John. I must adhere to my determination to go to Dawson and invoke the aid of the law in righting this grievous wrong."

"I'm doubtin'," the big man said, "that Downey can do you any good. If he should go up there an' the breed has the hooch cached where he couldn't find it, an' the Siwashes would clam up on him, he couldn't get no evidence to go to court with, even if he arrested the breed."

The good father's brow drew into a frown. "Clam up? I do not understand."

"I mean, if they'd shut up—refuse to squeal on the breed. An' that's just what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they'd do, for fear they wouldn't get any more hooch if they squawked."

The priest nodded. "I am afraid you are right. But there must be something the police can do. Surely the Lord will point the way to right this wrong."

Black John nodded. "Ye-e-a-h, He might, at that. But just in case the police might get balled up on the way He was p'intin', I'll go along down to Dawson with you. It's a long trail down there, Father, an' you ain't as young as you used to be. Anything could happen."

"But, John, I—I cannot permit you to make the trip merely to insure my safety. I have lived in this country for many years, and have traveled many trails, both in winter and summer. I'm not exactly a novice. I'm not afraid."

"Shore you ain't, Father. But you know as well as I do that on a long winter trail two men are better than one, every time. An' as for permittin' me," he added, with a grin, "when I feel a lucky streak comin' on I ain't in the habit of askin' permission of the clergy to ride it. I feel it my bounden duty to journey to Dawson an' instill some of the basic principles of the game of stud into the minds of them damn benighted sourdoughs. We'll take my dogs. You can leave yours here an' pick 'em up on the way back."

The priest smiled broadly. "Very well, John. Far be it from me to interfere with any man's bounden duty. I shall be very glad of your company on the trail."

ON THE afternoon of the twelfth day thereafter the two stepped into Corporal Downey's office at detachment headquarters of the Northwest Mounted Police. The officer smiled as his eyes shifted from the frail little priest to Black John's hulking figure. "Which one of you is bringin' the other one in—an' what's the charge?" he asked.

The big man returned the smile. "I'm fetchin' him in, an' he's charged with harborin' a suspicious character up there in the Feather Crick country."

When the two were seated, with their pipes going, the officer listened while Father Cassatt explained the situation. When he had finished Downey nodded. "Louis Harp, eh? I know him. In fact, he's in town now. I saw him on the street this mornin'. He's a bad actor. An' his father, old Pierre, was a bad actor before him. This Louis is the the worst of the two because he's smart. He's be'n in trouble both sides of the line, but so far he's managed to keep in the clear. There's half a dozen jobs I know damn well he's pulled but so far I've never be'n able to get the evidence to go to court with."

Black John grinned. "You know, Downey, I've often wondered why they don't pick out honest folks to make the laws."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd ort to know—it's your job to enforce 'em—or try to. An' you know that the way the law is, every cheap crook that breaks it knows his lawyer can find loopholes for him to slip through.

"Take it on Half-a-day, now: if we know a man is guilty we go ahead an' hang him after callin' a miners' meetin' an' givin' him a chanct to try an' lie out of it."

"You boys do a good job, up there," Downey admitted. "I wish every crick was as free of crime as Half-a-day is. But just the same, John, the law recognizes the fact that every one is entitled to a fair trial."

"Oh, shore. We give 'em a fair trial, too—'cause we know damn well they're guilty before we try 'em." Black John knocked the dottle from his pipe and rose to his feet. "Bein' steeped in rectitude myself, I can't see no p'int in settin' around discussin' the fallibility of the law. Guess I'll just drift around a bit an' see if I can't stir up some of the boys. Might be we could rig up a stud game."

CHAPTER TWO

Man-Bait for a Bear Trap

IN THE notorious Klondike Palace Cutter Malone, the paunchy proprietor, mouthed his big black cigar and eyed the half-breed who faced him across the bar. "If you've got two thousan' dollars worth of fur in yer cache, like you claim, why didn't you fetch it down when you come?"

"I couldn't fetch it down. I've only got five dogs. It's loose fur. My fur press is broke. It's an old press—my father's old press. He left it in the cabin when he went away, years ago. The cabin laid empty many years and the Siwashes stole most of the iron off the press. I'm takin' new iron

back when I go, an' then I fix the press an' bale all the fur an' bring it down in a York boat on the high water when the break-up comes in the Spring."

Malone frowned. "Looks like you could have fetched part of it down. How the hell do I know you ain't lyin'? How do I know you've got any fur in yer cache? Here I stake you to twenty gallon of hooch, an' you pull out with it, an' in six weeks yer back fer more hooch, an' not a damn fur to show fer it, an' claimin' you want forty gallon more hooch. We went in on this deal, fifty-fifty. I furnished the hooch an' you was to do the tradin'. If you've got two thousan' dollars worth of fur, the half of it belongs to me, an' by the good God, I want it!"

"You'll get it, an' plenty more with it," the breed insisted. "Listen, you know damn well I wouldn't dare to double-cross you—even if I wanted to. I know you've got plenty of men that would kill me in a minute if you give 'em the nod. But I don't want to doublecross you 'cause we've got too good a thing the way it is. Any time we can get two thousan' dollars worth of fur for twenty gallon of hooch, we got a good thing. I cut it plenty—make four gallon of trade licker out of a gallon, an' get six dollars a quart for it. We've got a good thing. There's a couple hundred Siwashes up in the Feather Crick country and they're doin' all right with their trappin'."

"How about that priest, up there, Father Cassatt? Won't he raise hell about his Siwashes gittin' hooch?"

The breed shrugged. "What can he do? The Siwashes won't tell him where they get the hooch. If he gets the police up there they won't find anything. An' the Siwashes won't talk. I keep the hooch cached where no one can find it. An' me, if they come to my place, I'm only a trapper. I keep a line of traps set—just in case."

Malone seemed mollified. "Guess you wouldn't dast to double-cross me, at that," he admitted. "It wouldn't be exactly healthy to. Okay I'll shove in forty gallon more. But, I'm warnin' you, I'll have some boys of my own up there jest before the break-up. They'll help you bale the fur an' run it down. You couldn't git out of the country with the fur anyhow, an' even if you did you'd never dast to show up in the Yukon agin."

THE door opened and a large man with a heavy black beard stepped into the room, paused for a moment as his eyes swept the interior, then turned on his heel and went on. The breed, noting the frown with which Malone had eyed the man, smiled. "That man, you don't like him, eh?"

"Like him! I hate his guts! That's Black John Smith, the damndest outlaw in the country. He don't hang around here none. Prob'ly stepped in lookin' fer someone."

The breed nodded. "Ah, yes—Black John. I've heard of him and his outlaws on Half-a-day Crick."

"Heard of him! Ain't you never saw him? Hell, Half-a-day Crick can't be so damn fer from the Feather Crick country where you hang out."

"About two days travel. I have passed the mouth of Half-a-day many times on the White, but I have never gone up to Cushing's Fort. The Siwashes stay away from there. Cushing will not sell them any hooch. He would not sell me any either for I am half Indian."

Malone shrugged. "Yeah, Cush nor Black John won't stand fer sellin' hooch to Siwashes. He's smart as hell, Black John is. I know of four or five fellers he's knocked off fer peddlin' it."

The breed shrugged. "I am smart, too. I am not afraid of Black John."

"You might not be afraid of him now, but you better watch yer step. He's a friend of Father Cassatt's an', by God, one of these days he'll be hangin' yer hide on a tree limb—an' you in it! I ain't no damn fool—an' he's took me fer plenty. An' he's took plenty of big crooks fer their pile, too—the more they had, the more he took 'em fer. Take it, first an' last, I'll bet he's made more'n a million. They claim he keeps better'n hundred thousan' in cash in Cush's safe all the time."

"I have read much in books. There have been many smart men. But always there comes someone who is smarter. And this Black John—because he has knocked off many men, that is not saying that he cannot be knocked off when a smarter man comes along."

Cutter eyed the breed sharply. "Listen," he said. "The day you prove to me you've knocked Black John off, I'll hand you a

thousan' dollars in cash. An' that ain't all. You could have a hell of a good thing up there, 'cause with Black John out of the way I could put one of my men up there to run Half-a-day, an' you could peddle hooch the hull length of the White, an' no one to bother you."

The breed smiled. "You can keep your thousand dollars, Cutter—an' your hooch trade on the White. Because when I knock Black John off, I'm going to take him first, as he has taken many others. And when I take him I will take him for plenty. For so much that your thousand dollars and your hooch trade on the White will look like chicken feed."

AFTER two nights stud-playing in the Tivoli Black John met Father Cassatt in the hotel lobby. "Well, how'd you an' Downey make out?" he asked.

"Corporal Downey has promised to start for Feather Creek the week after next. That should give Louis Harp time to get back there with his liquor, and Downey may be able to secure his evidence."

The big man nodded, "Yeah, he might. I'm takin' my sled to the blacksmith shop to get that runner fixed, so you be ready to start back about daylight tomorrow."

"If it's just the same to you, John, I believe I shall remain here and go back with Corporal Downey. Father Judge has asked me to accompany him on a visit to his mission on Forty-mile."

"Okay, Father. You'll be stoppin' in to Cush's for your dogs. I'll see you then. So long."

As he approached the blacksmith shop, Black John saw the breed he had noticed talking with Malone in the Klondike Palace, just leaving the place. He noted that the man eyed him narrowly as he passed. In the shop the blacksmith was putting the finishing touches on a huge trap. "What the hell is that you're makin'?" he asked, eyeing the object.

"Bear trap."

"A bear trap! Who the hell would want to trap a bear? An' look at the chain he's got on it. Cripes, that damn thing would hold an elephant."

The blacksmith nodded. "Yup. I told him it was bigger'n it needed to be, but he claimed that's the way he wanted it. He's a breed name of Louis Harp. Wanted the jaws twenty inches long an' ten inches high—double springs, an' fifteen foot of heavy log chain on it."

"Cripes," Black John grinned, "the work it'll take to haul that thing out an' set it would be more than the bear was worth."

"Yup. Chain an' all she'll weigh right around seventy pound. He claims a big bear has been robbin' his meat cache, an' he aims to ketch him."

"I see he's got a big padlock on the end of the chain."

"Yup. Jest come in a few minutes ago to see how the trap was comin' along, an' he pulls the padlock outa his pocket an' snapped it on the chain. Hell, fer's I kin see, he could of run the chain around the the tree, er log, er whatever he was anchorin' the trap to, an' then wired it together, an' saved the price of a padlock. But, long's he's payin' fer it, I'm makin' it like he says."

The sled runner was soon repaired, and the following morning Black John hit the trail for Half-a-day. Ten days later, as he swung from the White River, he shot a young moose that leaped from a thicket at the bend of the creek. As he stooped, knife in hand, to bleed the animal, he paused and a grim smile twisted the lips beneath the black beard. Removing a pint flask from his pocket, he pulled the cork, swallowed the remaining liquor, stuck the moose, and filled the flask with blood. Corking it, he slipped it into his packsack.

"Puttin' two an' two together makes four," he muttered. "I seen Cutter an' the breed eyein' me that day in the Palace. Cutter ondoubtless warned him about how I treat guys that peddles hooch to Siwashes. Prob'ly told him I ain't exactly no pauper, too. Then the breed gets a big bear trap made, an' he sticks a padlock on the end of the chain. A bear couldn't onwire the chain if he got caught—but a man might. Also, a man with his leg in a bear trap might dicker to get out. I've got a hunch that the tranquility of Half-a-day is due to be enlived by an incident." Whereupon he butchered the moose, loaded the meat on his sled and pushed on to Cushing's Fort.

"WHERE's Father Cassatt? An' how did he make out with Downey about that there hooch-runner he was tell-

in' about?" Cush asked as Black John stepped into the saloon the following morning.

"He made out all right. Father Judge wanted Father Cassatt to make a trip down to Forty-mile with him, an' when he gets back Downey's promised to go on up to Feather Crick with him an' investigate the matter."

"Huh," Cush grunted. "Them hooch-peddlers is smart. Chances is Downey won't git no evidence again' him if the Siwashes keeps their mouths shet. What we'd ort to do is go over there an' grab the damn cuss an' fetch him over here an' hang him fore Downey gits there. By God, onct you hang a man, he don't peddle no more hooch to no Siwashes!"

"The suggestion has merit," Black John admitted. "But the fact is, Cush, what I'm more interested in at the moment is a strike a couple of fellas made in them mountains over south of the White. I run acrost one of 'em in the Tivoli an' he had plenty of dust in his poke, an' if what he says is true, they've hit one of them rich pockets.

"They're cheechakos, an' don't like the country an' he wants to sell out an' go back to the States. I told him I wasn't investin' in no property till I'd looked it over first. He pulled out of Dawson to go back to his location the other mornin' an' wanted I should go back with him. I'd set in a stud game all night an' was too tired to hit out. I wanted him to wait a couple of days, but he said he had to git right back with a load of grub. He claims they've got a couple of Siwashes an' breeds workin' fer 'em an' the grub was runnin' low. So I told him to go back with the grub an' send one of them Siwashes or breeds over after me an' I'd go back with him an' look the property over. So if anyone shows up lookin' for me, an' I ain't here, send him over to my cabin. Sometimes them cheechakos makes a damn rich stride an' I ain't overlookin' no bets."

"Yeah, sometimes they do but mostly they don't," Cush replied. "This gent prob'ly had a few drinks in him an' was runnin' off at the head. Damn if I'd go kihootin' all over hell in the winter on the word of no cheechako. I'm bettin' no Siwash don't show up."

"The weather's good for travel, an' from what the fella said this crick can't be more'n two, three days from here. Anyway I'm goin' to take a shot at it if someone does come for me. An' I've got a hunch someone will."

True to Black John's prediction, several days later an Indian stepped into the saloon, glanced furtively around, and motioned to the big man who stood at the bar with several of the men of Half-a-day. When Black John joined him near the door the Indian peered into his face. "You Black John Smit'?" he asked.

"Yup. If you've got anything to tell me, come on over to my cabin. Cush don't allow no Siwashes here in the saloon."

Inside the cabin the Indian shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "You Black John, you frien's wit' Fadder Cassatt?" he asked.

The big man nodded. "Shore I am. Was there somethin' he wanted?"

The man nodded. "Fadder Cassatt, she say 'you go Half-a-day Crick, fin' Black John Smit', tell heem com' queek to Fadder Crick. Ees a breed, nem Louis Harp—ver' bad mans—sell hooch to de Siwash an' git hall de fur. De Siwash, dey hall git dronk.

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She say you mak' heem git to hell out of dere."

"H-u-u-m—sellin' hooch to the Siwashes, eh? That's bad."

The Indian nodded. "Ver' bad. Dem dronk all tam."

"Why didn't Father Cassatt come down after me himself?" Black John asked.

"Fadder Cassatt, she seek. She no feel good. She stay een de bed."

"Did you just come from there—come straight over here?"

"Yes. Me, I'm com' fas'—two day. Fadder Cassatt she say you no com' to mission. Louis Harp, she got cabin on leetle crick 'bout seven, eight mile 'fore you git to mission. She say you go to mission, de Siwash see you an' dey know he sen' for you an' dey git mad on heem. She say you go to Louis Harp cabin an' mebbeso you tak' heem to Half-a-day an' hang heem."

"Not a bad idea," Black John agreed. "An' how about you—will you show me where this Louis Harp lives?"

"I show you. I tak' you to de mout' of Louis Harp crick. Hees cabin 'bout two miles up de crick. I no go up de crick. Me, I'm 'fraid from Louis Harp. She mad on me 'cause I ain' buy no hooch."

Black John nodded. "Okay, I'll go along. I'll just throw my blankets an' some grub in my packsack. We won't bother with a dog outfit."

TWO days later the Indian paused and pointed to a trail that led to a small creek some distance below the mouth of Feather Creek. "Dat Louis Harp crick," he said. "De trail she go to Louis Harp cabin. Me, I'm no go dere. I'm 'fraid."

Shifting his rifle to the crook of his elbow, Black John took leave of the Indian and struck off up the creek. He proceeded slowly, his eyes on the snow of the trail. He had gone a mile and a half to a point where the trail passed between two enormous rocks with only room for the passage of a sled between. A grim smile twisted his lips as his eyes searched the apparently undisturbed surface of the snow. Stepping to the foot of a tree that grew at the base of one of the rocks, some ten feet off the trail, with his mittened hand he scraped the snow away from its base and encountered a chain.

It was a heavy chain, secured to the tree trunk by means of a padlock—the chain and the padlock he had seen in the blacksmith shop in Dawson. Seizing the chain he jerked the huge trap from beneath the snow in the trail between the rocks—at a point where anyone following the trail must certainly have stepped squarely into it. Reaching beneath the jaws he sprung the trap, then dragged it about for several minutes, roughing up the snow to the full length of the chain. Then, removing the bottle of moose blood from his packsack, he sprinkled the snow with blood and poured some on a blanket which he unrolled.

With the trap pulled well to one side of the trail, he laid down, wallowed about in the snow, then with his leg lying across the jaws of the trap, he spread the blood-stained blanket to conceal both leg and trap. A few minutes later, he opened his mouth and gave voice to a shriek of anguish. Again and again he shrieked and screamed, but his only answer was the weird sound of his own voice screaming back at him from the far rock rim. With his rifle ready he lay, his eyes on a bend of the trail only fifty yards beyond the opening between the rocks.

Surely, if the breed's cabin was only half a mile away he could hear those agonized shrieks for help, and the moment he rounded that bend he would get a rifle bullet square through the middle. Again he shrieked at the top of his lungs, and turned his head sharply at the sound of a low derisive laugh, to stare into the dark saturnine face that showed above the muzzle of a rifle at the edge of a spruce thicket scarce a dozen yards away.

"Get me out of here!" he cried. "I stepped in a trap—a bear trap—there on the trail between the rocks! I've be'n yellin' fer half an hour. For God's sake—get me out!"

"I heard your cries, and I came to release you. But first you must toss your rifle beyond reach into the snow."

"Why would I shoot you? Hell, man, if I shot you I'd die here in this damned trap!"

"I take no chances. Throw away the gun."

Black John tossed the rifle into the snow. The breed still kept him covered.

"And now the big revolver you carry beneath your shirt. I can see where it is bulging your parka."

As Black John's hand slipped beneath his parka and grasped the sixgun he considered for an instant his chance of a quick shot as he drew it out, but a glance at the unwavering rifle muzzle decided him against trying anything, and he tossed the revolver out of reach in the snow."

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost on Two Legs

THEN the breed stepped from the thicket, an evil smile widening his lips. "S-o-o—Black John Smith—the big outlaw—the man Cutter Malone says outsmarted other outlaws and has taken a million dollars from them and kept out of the clutches of the law. This Black John is so dumb he has stepped right in the middle of a trap."

"Get me out of here!" Black John cried. "Get me out before my leg freezes stiff!"

"I will release you in due time. I am Louis Harp, the man you came here to hang, as you have hanged others, for selling hooch to the Siwashes. But those others were not smart, or they would not have been hanged. I tell you now—it was I who sent for you, not Father Cassatt. I sent for you for a reason—but the reason is not to rid the country of a hooch trader. I laid my plan well. I set my trap and the big outlaw, Black John, walked right into it. It is to laugh. No matter how smart a man is, there is always someone who is smarter."

"You've got me. But for God's sake get me out of this trap! I tell you my leg is freezin'!"

"I will release you—but for a price."

"A price! What do you mean—a price?"

"Well, let us say one hundred thousand dollars. Surely, if you have a million, one hundred thousand dollars is not too big a price to pay for your life."

Black John scowled. "How can I pay you a hundred thousan'? I ain't got that much change on me."

"I did not expect you to have it with you. But you have it in the safe at Cushing's Fort, on Half-a-day. Cutter Malone told me so."

"Cutter's a damn liar. I've got sixty thousan' in the safe—an' not a damn cent more."

"Very well—sixty thousand, then. I will settle for sixty thousand."

"Okay. You've got me. I'll pay it. Let me out of here an' haul me down to Cush's, an' I'll pay you."

The breed laughed. "Sure you would pay me—with a rope! Do you think I am a fool! I have here a pencil and paper. You will write out an order for Cushing to pay the bearer sixty thousand dollars and I will collect it myself."

"But, good God, man—it will take you two days to get to Cush's an' two days to get back. An' by that time I'd be froze stiff!"

"That is true. But you will not freeze. My man—the same who guided you up here, will release you and take you to my cabin where it is warm and comfortable. Then he will summon Father Cassatt, who will look after you. I am not coming back. When I obtain the money from Cushing, I shall leave this country for good."

He called loudly, and the Indian appeared from the thicket, carrying two heavy clamps.

The breed continued. "Write out the order, and I will start at once for Half-a-day. One half hour after I leave, Kumtux, here, will clamp down the springs of the trap and release you." Retrieving Black John's revolver from the snow, the man cocked it, and handed the pencil and paper to the Indian. "Give it to him, so he can write out the order." He glanced into the big man's face. "Do not resort to any trickery. That order better be good—for if I do not receive the money, I shall return and kill you."

"Oh, Cush'll turn it over to you, all right. I'll say here that I need the cash to pay a couple of cheechakos for a location I aim to buy. I was tellin' him about that proposition not so long ago, an' he'll think that's where I'm at, now. You can tell him you was workin' for these boys, an' I sent you over for the cash."

WHEN the breed received the paper he read it carefully, folded it and placed it in his wallet. Then his thin lips twisted into a sneer of contempt as the black eyes rested on the prostrate man's face. "Black

John Smith—king of the outlaws! Pouff! You have hanged many men—and now it is your turn to die. But you will not die quickly, on the end of a rope. You will die slowly—miserably, right here where you lie. You thought you would hang me. You did not know that I am smart enough to turn the tables on you. You can lie here and think of that as you die. You can think also of your million dollars and wonder what will become of it. And you can think of me spending your sixty thousand amid women and wine and song in places far, far from here."

He turned to the Indian, and reaching in his pocket, tossed him a key. "Here you are, Kumtux, that is the key to the fur room. The fur is yours, now—the fur and the forty gallons of liquor that I just brought up from Dawson. I told you that if you would stick with me you would never regret it. Go back to the cabin now, and in the morning come back down here and release Black John. He will be frozen stiff by then. Drag his body back off the trail and leave it for the wolves." Retrieving a packsack from the spruce thicket, he adjusted it and struck off down the trail to the White.

When he had disappeared around a bend Black John appealed to the Indian. "Come on, get me out of here. You wouldn't leave a man to freeze to death with his leg in a bear trap."

The Indian scowled. "I'm no let you go. You hang me sure—for it you com' oop here—for trade de hooch to de Siwash. Dat better you die—den I ain' 'fraid no mor'!" And, turning his back, he stepped between the two rocks and headed up the trail.

Leaping to his feet Black John kicked his rifle out from under the snow, and leveled it at the Indian's back. "Hold on!" he cried. "You forgot somethin'!"

The Indian whirled at the sound of the voice, then his eyes widened and his mouth sagged open as he stared incredulously at the man who approached in swift strides. "You! You een de trap!" the man faltered. "How you git hout?"

"Chawed my way out. Hell, that trap ain't nothin' but steel! Turn around an' head fer the cabin."

When they arrived Black John continued, "Fish out that key an' roll them kegs out of the fur room." When the man had complied, Black John picked up a piece of rope. "Now, lay down on your belly an' put your hands behind your back an' hold 'em there till I get 'em tied." When the man's hands were secured, the big man picked up an ax and smashed the kegs, allowing liquor to gush out over the snow. Then he locked the fur room, pocketed the key and turned to the Indian. "Get up, now, an' head down the crick. You an' me are headin' for Half-a-day."

* * *

Louis Harp had struck out for Half-a-day following the back trail Black John and the Indian had left. Also following this trail the two made good time. Darkness fell as they topped a ridge and the flicker of a fire showed at the edge of a spruce copse a quarter of a mile away where the breed had camped for the night.

Glancing at the Indian, Black John warned. "Listen. You open your mouth to yell an' I'll kill you. We're campin' here—an' we aint makin' a fire. I've got a blanket apiece, an' we'll roll up in the snow. We won't sleep—but we won't freeze." He fed the Indian without releasing his hands. Later, when the breed's fire had died to a mere flicker, Black John filled his lungs and a weird shriek rent the still air. "Help! Help! Get me out of here! My leg's in a bear trap! Help!" His lips twisted into a grin as he saw a shower of sparks shoot upward from the breed's fire, then the flames leaped upward as the man tossed on dry wood.

From his vantage point on the ridge Black John's grin widened as he watched the breed, standing erect beside the leaping flames, peering this way and that into the surrounding blackness. He rolled up in his blanket, but slept fitfully in the cold. Each time he awoke he could see the breed's fire blazing high, could see, also, the form that sat bolt upright close beside the flames. At midnight, he again gave voice to a series of agonized shrieks. And again watched the breed leap to his feet and peer fearfully into the darkness.

SHORTLY after dawn the two ate all that remained of the moose meat in the packsack and hit the trail. Black John grinned as they passed the breed's camp of the night before. The fire had died to

ashes. Evidently the breed had been gone at least an hour. "He won't lose no time gettin' to Cush's," he opined. "He ort to make it by suppertime."

The prediction proved correct. Darkness was falling as Black John handcuffed the Indian to a bunk stanchion in his cabin, and hurried to Cush's, where he slipped into the storeroom and glued his eye to the 'peek hole', a slit placed close beneath a shelf, that gave a view of the interior of the barroom.

Cush and the breed were alone in the room and the breed was recounting bills as Cush counted them out onto the bar. Finally, he finished, pocketed them, and turned from the bar. "You better stop here tonight," Cush said. "You kin git an early start in the mornin'."

The breed shook his head. "No, I promised I would return as quickly as possible. There will be starlight. I can reach the White before I camp."

Slipping swiftly around to the door, Black John confronted the breed as he opened it. As the man leaped back into the room with a muffled cry on his lips, Black John held out his hand. "I'll take the sixty thousan' here, Louis," he said.

The breed's eyes widened in horror as they shifted from the bearded face to Black John's legs. Spittle drooled from his mouth as words faltered from his lips. "*Tahamanawas!*" he cried, reverting to the lore of his Indian forbears. "*Kultus tahamanawas!* I heard it in the night! Shrieking at me from the dark! But you—in the trap—your leg was in the trap—I saw blood on the snow!"

Black John grinned. "Oh, shore—that was moose blood you saw. Trouble with you birds that think you're smart—you jump to conclusions. If you'd been really smart, Louis, you'd have jerked that blanket off me, an' then you'd seen that when I sprung your trap I left my leg out of it."

The man went suddenly limp and leaned against a card table for support. "Cutter Malone . . . I should have listened to him. He said you were smart, smarter than all the others. He warned me to watch my step—or—or you would hang me."

"He did, did he? Well for onct in his life, Cutter was right." He turned to Cush, "Send One-Arm out to fetch in a quorum. We got to call the miners' meetin', an' get this damn cuss an' his Siwash hung before Downey gets here, or he'll defeat the ends of Justice."

THE END

PACKET-BUSTER

Like the Ancient Mariner's albatross, Captain McCall's past was an unbearable weight on his shoulders. . . . But a riverboat man can't run forever without coming full circle, and McCall found that haunting past suddenly lighting his trail to a strangely blazing future.

WITH the last of the Sacramento's up-river landings behind him, Pilot-Captain Peter McCall tooled the old sidewheeler through Carquinez narrows and on into the wide expanse of San Francisco's upper bay. It was blowing a summer gale. The bay was typically whitecapped and rough. And that was good. It kept McCall's clenched hands busy, his mind strictly on the business at hand—

Hackett's head snapped back as he reeled and started down. . . .

By STEVE HAIL

which was mooring the *Solano* to River Lines' dock, twenty odd miles down-bay, as soon as possible.

The barnyard run. Three days more or less—up to head of navigation, three days down, with stops any place that wanted to ship a sack of potatoes or a scrawny steer. Three forlorn and paint-blistered paddlers, running on the faith, hope and capital—all dwindling—of owner Jedediah Powers. With most of the up-country mines worked out and abandoned, river trade was where, when and if you found it. River Lines! Well, it bought a man his beans. It was a job. Or had been until today.

Apprentice-pilot Daniel Fournier came through the wheelhouse door, his button nose wrinkling at the odor of trampled manure lofting upward from the boiler deck. "Cap'n, why you'd ever want to leave the Hudson River passenger packets for this, has got me beat. I'd think—"

McCall said sharply, "Cubs learn by keeping their eyes open and their mouths shut, not by thinking!"

Danny's lip went suddenly atremble. "Yessir."

McCall relented. He found a smile, a small one. After all, it wasn't a secret—or wouldn't be after today. The crumpled paper in his pocket, the message that had come aboard by special messenger at Sacramento this morning, was proof of that. He said, "The *Solano* here is just my style. Broken down."

The wrinkles spread to Danny's brow.

McCall went on, "I busted up one of those Hudson packets a year or so ago. A famous one; complete with brass, braid, a band and bridal suites. I did a job on her. Anyway, that's what the records say. That satisfy your curiosity?"

Young Fournier worked hard to swallow his embarrassment. "I—I'm sorry, sir. I . . ."

"Forget it, son. I did long ago."

But he hadn't. He never would. He stepped away from the helm. "Take her, son." Then, with the apprentice's eager hands gripping the big star-studded wheel, and the wide blue eyes screwed tight with professional concentration, McCall fished the message from his pocket, wondering if the words had changed. They had not. They still said: *Hudson sternwheeler* Borealis *arrived yesterday under command owner Eliab Hackett. Hackett interested buying into River Lines with future expansion in view. Details on arrival.* It was signed: *J. Powers.*

That was fine. That was really great—for Powers. It would give River Lines a new lease on life. That was all Powers needed, really, enough working capital to see him through the next year or two. For trade would come back. Already there was evidence of that. True, the gold was gone, but the timber, the soil, all the golden resources of this great land were still untapped, awaiting exploitation. And when that day—not far distant—arrived, there was a natural roadway to supply it. The Sacramento. That was when River Lines would again come into its own. Jed Powers knew it. So too, evidently, did Eliab Hackett.

Hackett would, McCall thought bitterly. Hackett had done all right in the last year, judging from the gist of Powers' message. From skipper of the *Borealis* to owner, in addition to having money to invest in a coming thing. Well, he'd always had an eye for the future, especially the Hackett future. McCall knew that.

He looked up from the paper, staring out the window at the ragged surface of the bay, and suddenly he was seeing it all again. It was another stretch of water, another river, three thousand miles and twelve long months away.

IT HAD all happened within a few minutes of leaving the Manhattan dock, with the *Borealis* up-bound for Albany. River fog, thick as tangled gauze, was shrouding the Hudson. Captain Hackett, a blonde-haired god in impeccable uniform, had paused on the promenade abaft the wheelhouse to reassure a group of nervous—and admiring—passengers. First Officer McCall, alone at the wheel, heard Hackett's hearty baritone scoffing banteringly at their fears, promising them a gay passage. As if in confirmation the band in the main saloon had swung into a lively tune.

McCall remembered backing clear of the berth, gathering way and heading upstream. The last note of the band's rendition had been blotted out by the pressing fog, when its echo became a steam whistle's demanding blast as a down-bound vessel blew for right-of-way. One blast . . . she

was altering course to starboard. And she was close—coming closer fast. Too fast, McCall had realized, for the *Borealis* to swing clear in time.

Instinctively he loosed the first of two answering blasts, crossing signals with the approaching vessel. Technically it was wrong, but it seemed to be the only possible out, for he saw the other then, a little to starboard, her sharp stem looming high, foam at her cleaving bows. They were going to meet, sure as there was hell at the Horn. So, with collision sure, McCall knew his best bet was to swing to larboard, taking a glancing blow, hoping for the minimum of damage.

But then Hackett was beside him, his face as white as the surrounding murk and his voice shouting commandingly, "Starboard!" and his clubbed fist cuffing McCall's upraised arm aside. "Starboard, you fool!" and the *Borealis'* master was spinning the wheel in the opposite direction, putting the paddler dead in the path of the onrushing stranger.

McCall got it then, or thought he did, the reason behind Hackett's impulsive action. With collison certain, Hackett was acting not to soften the blow, or even to save ship or lives, but to put himself, as master, in the clear. And so the vessels met, bow to bow, in a rending crash of spintering wood and passenger's high-pitched screams of terror and . . . .

McCall preferred to forget the rest of it: the stampede for the lifeboats, and Hackett's voice, commanding yet soothing, attempting to bring order out of chaos. And he had. Oh, he had a way with him, Hackett had. However five lives were lost before the *Borealis* was warped back to her berth. But Hackett's professional honor was saved. His suave voice and manner had done much toward accomplishing that.

At the hearing the following day—well, after all, hadn't the mate, Peter McCall, been at the helm? And hadn't McCall crossed signals with the down-bound vessel, contrary to rules? McCall himself could not deny that. He could and did plead extenuating circumstances—to no avail. Hackett had denied that need for his mate's instinctive and basically sound action. Denied it vehemently, convincingly. So the board's findings could have gone either way. After due deliberation the decision had been: Captain Eliab Hackett absolved of blame and commended for prompt and valorous action in the face of dire emergency. First Officer Peter McCall held accountable and—oh, regretfully, of course—relieved of his pilot's license for the State of New York for a period of one year.

And that was that. One year! It might as well have been a lifetime. McCall had taken passage west.

Danny said, "Embarcadero shapin' up ahead."

McCall nodded. "Slow her, Danny."

The cub rang down his bells to MacLachlan, the Scots engineer, then passed the helm to McCall as they neared the dock.

POWERS was waiting for them there, a thin wisp of a man with a line in his wrinkled monkey's face for every one of many worries. But he should have been smiling now, by all accounts, though he wasn't. McCall thought he knew why, but he let the other broach it.

Powers said, "Good trip?"

McCall shrugged. "It'll pay running expenses."

Powers was silent a moment longer, worrying his white rag of mustache. He said at last, "Pete, there's been a hitch."

"I know. When did he find out about me?"

"Hackett? You've guessed it then? Well, he was going over the papers, personnel lists and so forth. Came across your name. Told me the whole story. Nothing I didn't already know, but he hinted that the Sacramento isn't big enough to hold the both of you. I—I . . . ."

McCall turned to the chart desk, scribbled a few lines on a scratch pad, handed it across. "Hackett is right," he said, "but your troubles are over. He'll sign now. That's my resignation. I'm done."

Powers stared at him. "It's no good, Pete. You're a part of River Lines. You stay or else. I told him that."

McCall shook his head. "You've had this break coming for years. Why should I spoil it? Don't worry about me. There's jobs to be had. Maybe I'll drive a team or something."

Powers laughed. The sound was harsh, humorless. "You're river-born and river-bred. You'll never be good for anything else. And now that things are beginning to

shape up . . . Look, Hackett's got big plans. He's going to refit the *Borealis*, make her the finest thing west of the Missouri. A crack passenger packet. Excursions and so forth till trade picks up enough to warrant a regular run. Hackett himself will—"

"I know," McCall interrupted. "Hackett, the dashing skipper; the hero from the Hudson. Passenger lists will be crowded, the ladies will fight to sail with him. He . . ." His voice trailed off wearily.

"What's wrong with that?" Powers insisted. "It's part of the business. Look at the *Petaluma*, Sacramento & Southern's new oil burner. Ever since that rescue at the levee break last year every passage is booked solid. Why—"

"There's just the off chance," said McCall gently, "that her full passenger lists are due to the fact that she's the cleanest, fastest packet on the river."

"Maybe," Powers grudgingly agreed, "but wait till the *Borealis*—"

"Remember?" McCall reminded him. "Hackett. I thought the deal was off?"

Powers' face sagged, but he recovered quickly. "Don't forget I own the franchise, the docking privileges, the goodwill that Hackett's got to have. He's bluffing. He'll sign."

"Not if you insist on selling me as part of the deal. He can't afford to have me underfoot. And that's all right with me. I just remembered the Columbia is booming. They need pilots there. So let's make it easy on everybody and leave me out of this."

"Pete," said Powers quietly, "you can't keep on running away forever. And I don't mean Hackett, necessarily. I mean yourself."

"Look." McCall heard his own voice go harsh with anger. He did it very well. "Why keep on arguing? Let's forget the whole thing. Frankly, I've had enough of this two-bit transportation system. Let's wind it up."

Powers reddened. "All right, Pete," he said tightly, "if that's the way you want it."

"That's the way I want it." McCall turned away, trying to keep the sickness from retching upward in his throat.

"Pete." There was something else in Powers' eyes now. Hurt, McCall supposed, or maybe pleading. He shrugged. "Yeah?"

"Do me a favor. One last trip. Hackett wants to size up our problems, meet the agents, look over the up-river landings. You're the man for that. You're due to head back up tomorrow. Will you take him with you?"

McCall said, "Why not? I'm paid for the week. Sure. And I've wanted to see Eli Hackett for a long, long time. This is as good a time as any. Eight in the morning be all right?"

At Powers' nod of approval he continued, "But let's understand one thing. I go as skipper, in full command. Hackett goes along for the ride. Right?"

"Right." Powers said. "You're skipper for as long as you want to be."

"This trip will be enough," McCall said.

HACKETT came aboard shortly before eight o'clock. He was much the same as McCall remembered him, tall and sparely robust, with a fixed smile on his thin lips that he probably thought was geniality, but wasn't. The pale eyes, hard as wave-washed pebbles, spoiled that effect.

Powers said nervously. "Captain Hackett, Captain McCall."

"We've met," said McCall. He kept his hands in his pockets so they wouldn't start swinging at that handsome jaw.

Hackett smiled uneasily. "Well, well, a small world, eh, McCall? Imagine running into you out here."

"Why not? A small world, but free."

Hackett ignored the challenge in the tone. He made it more subtle. He was very businesslike when he turned to Powers. "About that contract we were discussing. I'm afraid I'll have to insist on my original stipulation. Having full authority over personnel, I mean. You see . . ."

McCall broke in. "Nothing to be afraid of," he said quietly. "Powers already has my resignation. This is my last trip. I'm looking forward to it. Like old times, in a way." He turned and rang a stand-by down to the engine room. "Get your lines aboard, Danny," he told the cub. "Tide's on the make. We'll take advantage of it. Jed, see you in a few days—or sooner."

As they rounded clear of the dock McCall saw another paddler ahead and well up-bay. The *Petaluma*, judging by the oil smoke boiling greasily from her twin stacks.

Hackett, watching as they followed in the

other's wake, broke the taut silence of the wheelhouse. "Coming thing, oil," he said conversationally. "Beats coal or wood for economy and efficiency, I understand."

"You can have it," McCall said shortly. "Anyway, until they develop higher test boiler iron to withstand the increased pressure it generates."

That ended the shop talk. McCall corkscrewed the *Solano* steadily up-bay, keeping well clear of the shallows that bordered the channel on either hand. The wind, gaining strength with the rising sun, was crying gentle complaint in the hogframe rigging. Seas running counter to the tide had built up a nasty chop across the shoals, but the *Solano,* in the deep water of the channel proper and running dead before the weather, skipped lightly on the crests, making play of it.

But not for long. They dog-legged around Point Richmond into the unbroken sweep of the upper bay. The wind, now unhindered by protecting land, swooped down upon the paddler like a live thing, tearing at every projecting angle of the superstructure. And the seas had weight behind them here; they were white-lipped and ravening. The *Solano* labored heavily before the onslaught, groaning in every racking timber.

Hackett wiped a hand across his lips. "How much of this will the old hooker stand before she shakes apart?"

"She's taken worse than this," McCall said shortly. "She'll hold together." He gazed out upon the wind-swept reach before them. The *Petaluma* was a scant mile ahead, he saw, making heavy weather of it too, but rapidly nearing Carquinez narrows and its protecting high-sided hills. "Another half hour," he went on, "will see us out of this. We . . ." His voice trailed off to nothingness, his arm, sweeping a clearing arc across the clouded pane before him, paused and stiffened—for up ahead the *Petaluma* had disappeared.

No, not vanished. He saw that now. But where before her hull had been a solid, moving blot upon the foam-washed plane of water, there remained now just a great rosette of smoke, dark as eternal night, rising from her last position. Then, abruptly, the smoke was laced with flame, jagged, leaping, dancing, and the smoke cloud tore to tatters before their unbelieving eyes, then bannered off flatly on the raging wind. The sound reached them then, muted by distance and the piping of the gale, but recognizable for all of that—the *whooshing* blast of sonic steam as one or both of the *Petaluma's* boilers blew high to the wind-swept sky. They saw the vessel itself, at last—or rather what was left of her. It wasn't much.

"High pressure fuel," McCall said flatly, "and low pressure iron. One hell of a combination." He shook his head. "They'll need help, and fast." His hand, already groping for the bell pull, rapped out a demanding jingle. The *Solano* leaped ahead, her buckets thundering in wild crescendo as the engineer poured on the coal.

THEY covered the intervening mile in silence. Except, that is, for the ancient walking beam rocking madly on its bedding bolts, and the wild skirling of the wind and the hissing rush of pursuing seas as they ripped to scud before the gale.

"She's drifted beyond the channel's limits," said McCall as they approached. His voice was harsh and hopeless as he rang the engine down. "She's hard aground." Then he asked of no one in particular, "What do we do now? We can't get within a cable length without fetching bottom ourselves. Not that we could get near, anyhow." He pointed, though there was no need. The *Petaluma's* plight was there before them for any and all to see. She was a flaming funeral pyre. Her boilers, it was evident, had blown skyward through her decks. She was helpless, trapped there upon the shoal, with flaming oil, fanned by wind, encircling her.

How many souls had soared heavenward with her boilers was hard to tell, but there were survivors. At least for a while. McCall saw them now, looking like beetles upon a blazing log, passing buckets from hand to hand, frantically emptying them on the flames. It was as futile as spitting on hell's own embers.

"If it wasn't for the tide . . ." McCall slowly shook his head. Dead in the water the way she was, the survivors would ordinarily have had a fighting chance, for the weight of wind would conceivably fan the oil-fed waters to leeward and astern. That way the weather side of the vessel would be comparatively free of fire. The

crew could jump and take their chances in the water. But with this strong current running counter to the wind it kept the oil slick close about her like a halo around a mist-shrouded moon. The poor devils didn't have a chance. Unless—

McCall voiced the faint hope his mind had been toying with. ". . . unless we could clear a path to them. Dan, do you follow me? We'll swing our stern to them, drop an anchor, if necessary, to hold us there, then put our engine on full ahead. The paddle wash will sweep the fire aside, clear a path of open water to them. The vessel's doomed, but with luck we can send a boat down to it and take off the crew."

He saw swift approval in the cub's wide eyes, and he said. "Larboard, Danny, then. Hard over!"

"Wait!" and Hackett, forgotten until now, was braced on widespread feet beside the helm. "We'll not attempt it, McCall."

McCall felt his jaw go slack. "Won't we now? Then what would you suggest?"

"Nothing," Hackett said. "The *Petaluma's* lost. Any fool can see it." His shoulders lifted. "And small loss, at that. After all, she's a rival boat; our main competitor."

McCall looked at the man in wonder. Here was something for the book! A dozen men, maybe more, fighting for their lives, with little chance of winning—and Hackett had it figured in terms of commercial competition!

Hackett got that look and flushed. "Don't get me wrong. I'd like to help them, sure. But it's a hopeless thing. And it would put the *Solano* here in danger in case things went wrong. Surely you see my logic?"

McCall said slowly, "No, I'm afraid I don't. I . ." and then he did see it, suddenly and very clearly—though not exactly as Hackett meant it. This was the Hudson and the steamer *Borealis* all over again—Hackett looking out for his own, and the hell with who or what stood in his way. Right now, of course, the stumbling block was Peter J. McCall, even as it had been once before.

Well, that was fine. The Hudson was past history. This was very much the present. McCall turned away in deep disgust, picked up the speaking tube and told the engineer his plan. "It'll take some doing, Mac," he finished. "A big part of it depends on you keeping your jewelry turning over. How about it?"

He grinned at MacLachlan's righteously indignant answer. Then he racked the tube, and turned—whereupon the grin went dead. Hackett was standing beside the wheel, shouldering Fournier aside. His jaw was outthrust and grim. "We're making no rescue attempt, McCall. That's final. I'm speaking now as future owner of this vessel. You'll take my orders."

McCALL felt his own jaw muscles bunch, the skin draw tight across the knuckles of his clenching hands, and he stepped forward quickly. Then he hesitated, instinctively, not knowing why. From habit, as much as anything, perhaps. After all, he'd been second in command to Hackett for a term of years. Or maybe it was something else. Hackett could make him or break him. McCall knew that well. If things went wrong with this projected rescue—well, Hackett's testimony at the inevitable hearing could end forever his professional career. It nearly had before. Oh, there would be evidence weighed, of course, but in the end it would be as before. It would be the famous Captain Hackett the board would listen to, not some underling. McCall could hear their verdict now: "Peter J. McCall held responsible—hereinafter judged unfit for command. License to be . . ." And this time it wouldn't be a year's suspension. This time it would be for good.

And there was another angle. Cross Hackett now, and the chances were that the *Borealis'* owner would find other outlets for his idle money—leave Jed Powers to fight his losing battle alone. Yes, there were all those things.

McCall sighed and looked astern. Though the seas breaking green across the *Petaluma's* bows had kept the main decks free of fire, tongues of flame were now licking greedily at her upperworks. A great gray backdrop of smoke, like life's final curtain, was settling between the doomed men and their would-be rescuers. That was just as well. For the *Petaluma's* crew to see the *Solano* coming near, only to turn away, would be too much to bear. This way, at least, they would hope until the last that rescue was on the way. It was a

hope, McCall told himself, they had every right to expect. He straightened suddenly. That was it, of course, the kernel of the thing. The *Solano* must try to reach them, futile though the attempt might be. So he sighed again and turned.

"Orders?" he said to Hackett. "Maybe you've forgotten. This is not the Hudson, nor the *Borealis*. I'm the master here. You, in a sense, are just a passenger. So we'll try to get a boat down to those poor devils. Hackett, stand aside."

This time as he stepped forward he did not hesitate. Not even when the other stood his ground and threatened, "McCall, I'll see that you never set foot on another steamer's decks within the continental limits of this country. I can make that statement stick."

"You probably can at that," McCall nodded complete agreement, but his right hand lashed out savagely in a short and vicious arc. It landed full to the side of that classic jaw, and Hackett's head snapped back and he grabbed at the wheelspokes as he reeled and started down. The action stayed his fall just long enough for McCall to hit him again, twice, as he stumbled backward. This time Hackett went all the way. "Danny," said McCall. "Hard a'larboard and full ahead. We've wasted too much time as it is. We've a job cut out for us."

THAT was understatement, but at last they had their preparations made—a stern anchor deeply imbedded in the mud, the *Solano's* paddle-wheels thrusting slow ahead, marking time, against the hindrance of it. McCall held her thus on the channel's edge, a hundred yards to weather of the flaming hulk, while the *Solano's* crew made the longboat ready.

"I'm taking the boat down myself," McCall told the apprentice pilot. "Oars won't be much good in the millrace that's going to be our wash. So bend a stout line to a forward thwart. That way you can slack the boat down till I reach the *Petaluma*. Then, when I get the crew aboard you can haul us back up with the winch. Danny, most of this will depend on you—the way you handle engine and rudder. The trick's to sweep a straight, clear path through oil and flame. You vary a hair and let it close around us, we'll burn for sure. Son, can you do it?"

Danny's mouth was ringed with white, his lower lip a'tremble. "I can try, sir," he said at last. "Yes, of course I can."

"Good boy!" McCall slapped him lightly on the rump. "Son, I'm on my way."

"No you're not!" and Eliab Hackett stood beside him, jaw bruised and swelling, but his eyes as hard as ever.

McCall's fists curled; he cocked them both. So he hadn't put Hackett down to stay? Well, this time he'd do it right. But something in the other's eyes made him hesitate. There was fear there for an instant, stark and sickening to see. McCall recalled that look. That day on the Hudson when— Then a wan smile curved Hackett's lip. He said, "Handling the *Solano* in this wind and sea is a man's chore, not a boy's. And a man who's familiar with her ways and whims. McCall, right or wrong, we're in this now. You're the skipper—you'll stay here where you belong. I'll take the longboat down." The smile broadened for a fleeting second, then was gone. "That's an owner's order too."

McCall felt his fists relaxing. He blinked, wondering if he'd heard aright.

He evidently had for Hackett went on, "And I'll go alone. More men would only be in the way."

McCall shook his head. "The odds are all against you getting back. Why, if anything should go wrong here . . ."

Hackett's pale eyes snapped. "It's up to you to see it doesn't!"

"Aside from that," McCall said slowly, "suppose there's a sudden shift of wind? You'd be caught there like a crippled duck in a sea of flame—with about the same chance of living. Or suppose . . ." The words trailed off, for Hackett was gone, leaping lightly to the longboat, waterborne at the stern. He raised one hand in the signal to slack away. The hand was shaking.

McCall felt a wondering frown puckering the skin above his eyes. He said slowly to himself, "Well, I'll be damned!" Then, sharply: "Danny, there's a lone tree on the far shore there for you to steer by. Vary a hair on either side and I'll break your good right arm!" He picked up the speaking tube. "Mac, I want Full Ahead, but build it gradual. Keep that engine turning over. That's all I ask." Before he racked the tube and turned away, he added," . .

though, Mac, if you're any good at prayer, you might throw that in too."

THUS the paddle boat *Solano* made the run of her long and honorable career. A run that was to take her nowhere, except, perhaps, to glory. Anchored by the stern, she lunged ahead on the bar-taut anchor cable, remaining stationary, but with the wash of her thundering buckets manufacturing a man-made river behind her. And down its turbulent center, current-borne like a chip on a string amid a mountain rapids, the *Solano's* longboat weaved and danced its precarious way.

The boat reached the rim of the oil-fed lake of flames, but already the rushing current boiling aft from the vessel's paddles had cleared a channel there of sorts.

So the boat bobbed on, running a gantlet down the tunnel of fire, ever nearing the stricken *Petaluma*. Once, MacLachlan's engine faltered, but even as McCall's heart did the same, the engine caught again and drummed on.

So in the end it was done. McCall saw Hackett reach the *Petaluma's* wave-washed bows, watched a half score of men scrambling forward to the longboat's safety. He nodded at the winchman then, cupped his hands and cried, "He's got 'em all! Heave away! Bring them home!"

It wasn't quite that simple, but sheltered somewhat by the *Solano's* lee and with McCall throttling the engine down as far as he dared, the longboat made her laborious return. The rescued crewmen, smoke-grimed and exhausted, were helped gently over the *Solano's* rail. Eliab Hackett was the last man to board. The heat of that passage down the corridor of flame must have been more than McCall imagined. Hackett's eyebrows and lashes were gone, the fair skin of his face now looked like fire-charred liver. The eyes were as pale as ever, though strangely not as hard. His swollen lips parted faintly in a painful grin. "As close to hell as I ever hope to be till the devil prods me in! McCall, you did a job. Now, let's get out of here."

McCall nodded at Fournier. "Cut loose the anchor, Danny." He turned again to Hackett. "These men'll have to have help as soon as possible. Frisco or Vallejo, up the bay? They're equally as close."

"Make it San Francisco then," Hackett said. "You'll want to get acquainted with your new command."

McCall must have looked his puzzlement, for Hackett snapped, "The *Borealis*, man! I wouldn't want a better man for master."

"No?" McCall said slowly. "For my money I'm looking at one now."

The frown, he guessed, was still bracketing his eyes, because Hackett said quickly, "All right, River Lines has two heroes then. What's wrong with that? It'll fill the passenger lists. I ought to know. Remember?" The smile, starting, pulled down at the corners. "But as for me—well, I'll stick to the business end of this corporation from here on in. Give Jed Powers a hand. He's getting old for details, travel and such. I'm the shore-side type, I guess, beneath it all. I found that out today. You see, it wasn't that I didn't want to help the *Petaluma*. I was scared as hell, that's all."

"Yes," McCall said. "I know. But . . ."

The pale eyes were thoughtful now. "How many men did we take off her?"

"I haven't checked. About a dozen."

"Would you say that evens the score for . . . for—?"

McCall nodded soberly. "And more."

Hackett frowned. "That's a thing that's been troubling me. And something else. I owe you an apology. More that that, of course. I—well, back there on the Hudson . . . it wasn't what you think it was. I lost my head, was all."

"Forget it," McCall growled suddenly. "I was as wrong as you, if you want to face the facts. It was a fall of the dice, that's all, that determined the inquiry board's decision. As for today—well, I was just as scared as you, if you want to pursue this further. I don't. I—"

Hackett waved him to a stop. "Funny how a man can change when he sees all his chips on the table, and he's sure he holds a losing hand. It's like—like being born again, almost." He rubbed one hand tenderly along his swollen jaw, then grinned. "Yes, re-birth, I guess you'd call it. Aided and abetted, in this case, by a good crack on the chin. Right, McCall?"

"Right!" McCall was suddenly grinning back. He turned. "Danny, you can head her for the barn."

TENSLEEP'S GOLDEN GUN-RULE

By BART CASSIDY

AROUND ORO GRANDE, folks may tell you Ozzie Sarg's a model to hold up as an example for rangeland youth. Mebbyso. He's sheriff of Rimrock County an' a upright man—meanin' he don't walk on all fours. He's a pillar of the church, I reckon 'cause he holds it up by robbin' the collection plate. He practices the Golden Rule, meanin' you cross his palm with gold or he rules you to jail. His middle name is Faith, Hope an' Charity: Faith in his sixes; Hope that he'll collect more an' bigger bounties; Charity, well, he says it's better to give than receive—bullets.

The sheriff who bought Tensleep Maxon whiskey in tough Oro Grande, reckoned the rotgut not only bought the famed "Horse-Trader's" guns—but his body and soul as well!

I earn the honor of Mister Sarg's acquaintance the time I hit Oro Grande with mazuma in my jeans an' my heart full of love for my feller man. Steppin' into the Coronado Saloon, I sing out an invitation an' I'm almost crushed in the stampede. With all hands lined at the bar an' Sunnybrook flowin' copious, I'm joined by a smilin', easy-to-look-at gent who shoves my double eagle back at me.

"Your money's no good, stranger," he says, hearty. "This one's on the house, meaning on me—Ozzie Sarg."

"Glad to meetcha," I grin. "It's white of you. Name's Slippery Elm Jones. I'd admire to do something for you sometime."

"Maybe you can, Jones. Well, here's looking at you."

"Mud in your eye, feller."

We toss 'em down. He drapes an arm across my shoulders an' orders another round, refusin' my money. As we get oiled, we sing a little, the harmony holdin' no hint of blighted friendships—even them that only last till the whiskey wears off. Presently he invites me into his office at the rear, where we light fat seegars an' fog the lights.

"I once knew a boy named Diogenes Jones," he says, eyes sparklin'. "He owned a lantern an' was always looking for an honest man. Any kin to you, Slippery?"

"You know Old Diog?" I beam. "That was my night-travelin' brother—only one of the Montana Joneses ever accused of bein' real honest, in a pious sort of way."

I like his hearty laughter. I like him. Sarg, I decided, ain't a bad sort for a rimrocker to be friends with. I tell him so.

"I like you too, Slippery," he says. "I'd admire to have you with me. You'll find I'm easy to work for an' Oro Grande ain't exactly dead."

"The name is Spanish for money, Sarg," I wink. "How live is the place?"

"Sky's the limit, Slippery." His fingers are laced only inches from his fancy Colt's.

"Only rule is that the place stay fit fer women to live in."

"I insist on that, Sarg. You wasn't by any chance figgerin' on me as marshal?"

He shakes his head, pityin'. "Hardly, Slippery." An' then his eyes change. "I have you in mind for something more exciting, *Tensleep!* Pretty slick, you driving my thoroughbred colts from the railroad corral to my B Bar C and selling them to my foreman for twenty-five hundred. I can use you, fella."

"No!" I gasp. "You mean you own the B Bar C an' them—them ponies?"

"Coincidence, eh?" He grins at my embarrassment. But his eyes ain't grinnin'. "You know, don't you, that I can shoot you dead and collect the thousand simoleons on your scaly hide. You know why I don't?"

"Sure do, Sarg. I'm free, healthy an' you've no idea how fast."

Sarg's bullets sing grave tunes about me.

"Hogwash! I don't shy from gunplay, but this deal is worth thousands. Well?"

Cripes! I eye the barred window an' heavy door. "Spread 'em out, Sarg."

"First," he snarls, "fork over my twenty-five hundred."

"What do I get out of this, Sarg?"

He smirks. "Protection from sheriffs. Top gun wages."

"Suppose I ain't interested?"

"Then," he grins, "I'm afraid I'll have to sick my dogs onto you, Tensleep."

"Dogs? You gone in for kennels, Sarg?"

"Gundogs, you fool!"

"Yeah?" I sneer. "I don't suppose Oro Grande folks an' their sheriff even suspect they're cuddlin' a snake like you."

"They ought to." He laughs, flippin' his coat to show a badge. "*I* am Oro Grande, Tensleep. And sheriff too. Are you convinced?"

I AM, little as I like it. He's plannin' a deal where I take the risks. If I win, he glaums the profits, bullets me an' sells my pelt. If I lose, he gathers my remains an' has the bounty for his pains. "What's the rip, Sarg?"

"That's better," he smiles. "Twenty odd miles north, the crooked Crescent Star holds the cream of many a horse outfit—two hundred ponies. I've planned to clean out that nest and this is a good time. I'll send along twenty gunnies. While they're smoking it out, you and a few waddies will collect those broncs, haze 'em off the meadow and down the gorge to my north pasture, slowing to leave a half-dozen head on the Quarter Circle X fifteen miles out—"

"What's that for?"

He waggles a reproving finger. "You ask too many questions, Tensleep."

"Too many considerin' my skin's at stake? Is Quarter Circle X friendly or—"

"Your skin's safe, with gunmen guarding you fella. Circle X happens to be a stove-up spread with a pretty lady to be taken into account." He winks. "Savvy?"

"Gal stuff," I snort. "I should worry about that, but two hundred ponies oughta be worth more'n gun wages—to an expert."

"Look!" he glowers. "All this is out of the goodness of my heart. All I'm doing is returning these ponies to their rightful owners."

"In a pig's eye," I blat. "The less augered about that, the better." I bust out into the circus barker's sing-song. "Come in close, folks, an' I'll tell yuh what I'm a-goin' to do. . . ." He goggles at me sorta fishy, certain I'm under too much pressure to try anything. So I ups to my feet an' I outs Meat-in-the-pot an' there's Sarg lookin' down the black bore of my gun. "H'ist 'em, Sarg!"

Watchin' him careful, I search him an' pocket his cutter. He's gloatin'. "Now what, my fine feathered friend? Minute you show outside, you'll get burned down. This should get interesting."

"I can promise that, Sarg. You're going out with me, forkin' your horse an' sidin' me outa town."

He's pale now, an' his eyes show fear. "What you want?" he mumbles, sullen.

I back off, the pocketed gun level. "Depart smilin', Sarg. Neither fast nor slow. My cocked gun will be in your kidney. Hesitate, signal, holler or break an' I'll gut shoot you. Ambulate!"

It's been so long since he's faced the real thing, he's scairt stiff an' obeyin' to the letter. Out we go grinnin', across the barroom, through the entranceway an' outside. "To the stable!" I command an' he angles to'rds the barn, completely ignorin', so far as I can see, the guards lurkin' along the front of the Coronado. Two of them posted men foller us, warned I reckon by Sarg's silence. "Turn 'em back, fella," I order, "for if they enter the barn, you're a dead pigeon."

"Back to your posts!" he raps.

That stops 'em an' we enter the barn. With me overseein' the job an' watchin' the doorways, the hostler saddles Hassan an' Sarg saddles his wiry, blaze-face black. I won't ever know where he gets the gun, but suddenly his head's down behind his pony's rump an' his gun's parting the tail hairs, flaming in my face. Wow!

For a moment, I think my head's blowed plumb off. But it turns out I'm lucky, only powder burns an' eyes blinded by the flash. Unable to see Sarg, I smash lead into his black pony, fork Hassan flyin' an' sink the spurs. Sarg's bullets sing grave tunes about me an' then we're roundsidin' into a dark alley. . . .

Sarg's bull bellers are rousin' the town, offerin' his gundogs important money for my carcass—dead. This promises to be quite some race. Hassan's rested, fed an' ready to go. Me, I'm in quite some doubt as to how to reach the Crescent Star, the spread Sarg was hirin' me to rob, never knowin' I came here only to visit the place. Two old friends of mine run it—Half-moon Harper an' Bravo Jack Starr.

TEN MILES out, I hear the chase behind me, but they've never got close enough for me to see 'em. At fifteen miles or thereabouts, I spot a lone light off to my right an' judge that must be the Circle X, where Sarg's gal lives. An' right about there the Oro Grande renegades get their first look at me, an' start blastin' bullets while still too far away. I call on Hassan an' the old fella responds.

Four miles past the Circle X, with the Diablitos risin' like a frownin' black wall before me, I suddenly run smack-dab into a couple of Mexicans ridin' along singin', one strummin' a guitar. Plungin' between 'em thataway almost scares them two to death. They squeal like rats. *"Ai, Madre de Dios. . . . espectro!" "Dios dame salvamiento!"*

The string-picker drops his guitar an' wheels his pony as if to pick it up. An' I collar him. He yells bloody murder, prayin' to God to be delivered from this demon from hell. I have a hard time makin' myself heard an' gettin' an answer from him. An' then only in a choked whisper. *"Si, si, sí. El Señor Diablo.* Do not harm Pablo and I tell you. The Crescent Star ees een the Panoche Meadows, up Vega Canyon —the beeg black one—*alli mismo. Adios!"*

He points, wrenches away an' spurs into the night like his conscience is botherin' him. Ozzie Sarg's Oro Grande gundogs are gettin' real close an' I give Hassan his head—pointin' him to'rds the black slot Pablo, the Mex, said was La Vega Canyon.

A half mile goes by an' suddenly the gorge is widenin' an' the walls are lowerin'. Somewhere up ahead a horse whinnies shrilly an' a cool breeze loaded with the smell of water graze stings my nostrils. An' the challenge near lifts me outa the kak.

"Haul in that bronc!"

That's a voice an' a lingo I understand. I stop Hassan with a word, wrap my knee around the horn an' set there rollin' a cigarette. Pebbles rollin' down a slope. Starlight runnin' along the twin barrels of a buckshot gun. It makes me smile. Half-moon Harper, who used to ride with Butch Cassidy, was strictly a scattergun man.

"One false move, feller, an' you'll get nothin' but flowers an' slow music."

Whee-ew! He moves down to the bank on my right—a big, bearded man. "Where'd you come from?"

"Oro Grande! With Ozzie Sarg an' his gundogs a jump an' a half behind me."

"Yeah?" He vents a snarly laugh. "Looks like Sarg would get a new scheme. He's tried this one four times now an' three of his men never will come back. You think of ary reason why you should?"

"Nary a reason, Whiskers."

"What's yore excuse for comin' in here, outside of spyin' for Sarg?"

"I came to see a couple of friends."

"Yeah?" Again that laugh. "Friends, he says. Who might they be?"

"Halfmoon Harper an' Bravo Jack Starr."

"Boy," he laughs, "you start big. I. . . ." He pauses, listening. From somewhere high up, along the rim of the gorge, comes a far, wild sound—sort of a cross between a sharp halloo an' a coyote cry. It hits this guard hard. "You told the truth," he mutters, as if that's a miracle. "They're after yuh an' they're comin' in. Come along with me." He takes my gun, forks a pony tied in the brush an', stirrup to stirrup, we gallop onto the wide meadow an' to'rds a lone light burnin' yonder. He smashes three shots at the sky an' looses the same call that drifted down from the ridge. When we reach the place where the light gleams, a dozen cabins are spewin' out men.

My guard hollers, "Hawssbackers enterin' the gorge, trailin' this feller I've got here . . . or so he claims. Give the name uh Peaceful Jones. You better look him over, boss."

"Send him in here." A blocky man retreats from the lighted doorway an' the guard gives me a shove inside. The blocky man is settin' at a table, lookin' at me from under bushy brows. It's big Halfmoon, all right, but it hurts me to see him. He was hearty last time I seen him but now he's old, wrinkled, his rheumy eyes puzzled. "Seems like I orta know you, friend. . . . or should I?"

"Remember the Kid, Halfmoon? The Kid who disobeyed Butch an' rode from Hole-in-the-Wall to Little Big Horn to tidy up his dad's grave?"

"Tensleep, by the gods!" He grabs me, huggin' me like I was a long-lost son. "I should uh knowed yuh, son, but my memory ain't like once. I've bin through hell. . . ." He looses me, locks the door an' beckons me into his bedroom, barrin' the door. Without a word, he moves a bunk an' lifts a hinged square of floor. A ladder leads down. "Hole card," he says, "for a man's bad run of luck."

He lifts two Winchesters an' a Colt's in a rolled belt from under the floor. He hands me the six. "Hell of a time for a visit, Tensleep. You'll have to excuse me."

"What ails you, Halfmoon?"

"Tryin' to go straight." He sighs, twists an' lights a cigarette. "Me an' Bravo filed here, askin' only to be allowed to raise an' train cuttin' ponies. We done all right till Ozzie Sarg come along an' got himself elected sheriff . . ."

"I met him, Halfmoon, an' found him dog-leg crooked. He been ridin' you?"

"Blackmailin' us. You knew him in Zortman as . . . . no, that was before your time. He was Sergeant Osworth then—a damn' Judas!"

"The pattern never changes," I nod, bitter. "Osworth—I've seen the name in Zortman—is down here now, wearin' the badge an' holdin' the old days over you, eh?"

"We can line his pockets or go to the pen on them blanket murder charges still in force against the Wild Bunch. What could we do, Tensleep? We'd uh both been better off if we'd pulled stakes an' let him have it. But after a few payments, he began to ask favors for gunslingers needin' work. An' he began to have swacks of stole ponies drove in an' pastured, without a go-to-hell. We was in the rustlin' business again, against our wills."

"No crook," I say, thoughtful, "is ever content to let a man stay honest. By the way, where is Bravo? He's not—?"

"He rode to the rodeo at Cienega, hopin' to peddle some broncs." He looks bleak. "He's due back. Overdue. I'm beginnin' to worry. . . . listen!"

Across the meadow, guns has started boomin'. I grin. "There's Sarg's finish, Halfmoon. Buckin' a Winchester welcome with the usual results."

"Wrong, Tensleep. I'm scairt it's the

finish of loyal boys standin' up for the spread. Sarg's loaded my outfit with his stool pigeons. His coming tonight is likely the signal to take over."

PUZZLED, I tell him about Sarg's "or else" proposition, how I cheated it an' got piled tryin' to capture him. "Why would he send me here to steal his own stuff, Halfmoon? If he hadn't black magicianed a gun, I'd have fetched him here an' your troubles would be over."

"Sarg is slick, son, an' you can bet he's got plenty guns cached against emergency. He didn't want you to rustle stock up here. He wanted to bring out your carcass to discredit my outfit an' make a hero of himself. He's already ruined our name beyond repair. Our pastures are full of stolen stock. Bravos mebbyso dead. I'm blue."

"Cheer up, Halfmoon." I squeeze his arm. "It can get worse. Oh-oh, what now?"

A knock rattles the door. "Bushy, Halfmoon. We're licked if you can't help . . ."

I move to open the door. Halfmoon yanks me back. "No, Tensleep!" he whispers. "Hear that shootin' tailin' out? My boys are finished. Bushy's a Sarg man." He hands me the lantern, motions me into the hole. Ten foot down I hit bottom an' wait while he pulls the bunk in place, lowers the trap an' descends, carryin' the rifles.

"Wonderin' where this leads?" he grins. "Years ago, Hardrock Herndon opened a lowgrade vein in the hill behind this house. After Injuns gave him trouble, he bored this tunnel from his diggin's to the house, secret. I nursed him through his last sickness an' tonight he pays off. Here, carry one of these guns an' gimme that lantern."

It seems more like a mile than eighty rods. Its timbers are green, moldy. Water drips from the roof into pools on the rocky floor. The air's bad till Halfmoon opens a door through the mine lagging—a door one would never suspect. The tunnel portal is close an' Halfmoon, leavin' the lantern at the junction, hurriedly leads the way there. The house, blazin' with light, lies below, with the meadow stretchin' flat an' pretty beyond. Fightin' is finished. Several men are at the hitchrack, strippin' gear from captured ponies. But mostly the renegades are in the house—the crash of a door tellin' us why. Halfmoon laughs soft an' bitter.

"Hope Sarg's leadin' 'em, Tensleep. Wait a mo'!" He returns to the lantern an' though I can't see what he's doin', my ears tell me. A man doesn't soon forget the hiss of a powder fuse.

"You planted powder under that house?" I ask, when he returns.

"Hardrock's bright idea," says Halfmoon. "He didn't need it; I do."

"What about blowin' up your own men?"

"Bad guess. These reptiles don't take prisoners. Hold onto your hat. This is fast fuse an' the's ten boxes of dynamite under that shack. When she blows, foller me."

A blindin' flash blots out the house. Concussion jars my senses, shakin' the solid rock I'm layin' on, sendin' down showers of rock an' dirt at the portal. I lay breathin' hard, head on my forearms, listenin' to debris fall for what seems an hour. Then Halfmoon's jabbin' me. "Rain of judgment's over, Tensleep. Let's travel!"

"Where, Halfmoon?"

"Oro Grande. Sarg's Coronado Saloon. You cover me while I search the place for some hint about Bravo—mebby a bill-of-sale for ponies . . . or anything."

I follow him around the hill to a hidden corral. We fork fast-lookin' critters, kept saddled by nervous men for quick getaways, an' ride onto the meadow. Horse bands are racin' like crazy, snortin', squealin' with fright. There's a hole where the house stood an' if anybody's left alive,

they're sure layin' damn' low an' quiet.

Never slowing, Halfmoon spurs straight for the gorge, blind to the scattered bodies near the neck.

Down La Vega gorge we ride, kickin' spray. As we hit the road below an' head west, Halfmoon barks, "We're follered! Pull aside till we see who it is."

In deep brush an' with guns ready, we wait. Hoofbeats! Whinny of a horse! "It's Hassan!" I holler, an' shrill my whistle. "My horse, Halfmoon. He found me!"

The frightened critter lopes up, saddle an' bridle gone, head bleedin'. Whickerin' happy, he tries to nuzzle me onto his back. I want to cry; an' mebby I do. Good old Hassan. I hardly expected to see him again. He travels alongside as we head for Oro Grande. Where the light attracted my notice comin' up, Halfmoon turns through an arched gateway. "Widder Merrick's place, Tensleep. Ever since Sarg's hellions killed her man, she's bin sparked by that romantical pardner uh mine. He might be here." He reins in as a rider comes racin' from the house, shoutin', "Barton, that you?"

"Halfmoon!" A slim, red-complected youngster roars up. "Am I glad to see you. We've got Bravo Jack in there. He's shot in the chest. I hated to leave the women alone or I'd have gone for the medico sooner. But now he's sinking an'—"

"Hurry, son!" barks Halfmoon. "Kill that pony gettin' that sawbones. We'll look after your gal an' her maw. Don't worry about Sarg; he ain't in town. . . ."

HE'S SPURRIN' one way with me at his flank; the Kid's rowelin' the other. Down at the house, we hit dirt an' dash onto the porch. Halfmoon busts in unceremonious, further scarin' women who fall onto his neck, weepin' hysterical. They look like sisters, Flora an' Peggy Merrick, an' pretty too. Can't blame Bravo Jack, who always was a soft touch for a pretty face. I go on through to the bedroom where Bravo's layin' unconscious. Somehow I know it's his finish. He's pale, breathin' hard an' fast, hot. Forkin' the death bronc an' spurrin' for shadow trails. He's lived a generation that's fast passin'; I don't pity him. But young Peggy. Her dad murdered. Her friends shot down. Her lover's life in danger. She may be told that the man responsible will cause her no more griet, but it will be a long time before she wears out the terror.

As I'm thinkin' those thoughts, I'm lookin' down at Bravo Jack's still face. An' suddenly I see life pouring into it an' the lids are flutterin' His eyes open an' fix on my face as I kneel.

"You're Tensleep, ain't yuh?" he whispers, weak. "Where's Halfmoon?"

"In the other room, Bravo. I'll get him. . . ."

"Wait. There ain't time. Tell him. . . ." he chokes an' seems about to slip away. But he rallies a little by tremendous effort. "Tell Halfmoon to watch out. He . . . he's coming. Sarg is coming to kill."

"He came, Bravo—and died."

Again that puzzled look. His head wags loosely. "Tell him Sarg's coming . . . to . . . kill!" His voice rises to a whine an' I know he's too far gone to understand that Sarg really is dead, blown all to hell. His lids droop an' his breath rattles out. I fail to find any pulse at his throat.

Halfmoon comes poppin' into the room. "Didn't I hear Bravo talking, Tensleep? How is he doing?"

"He's dead, Halfmoon. You heard him speak, but the effort cost him what little life he had left. He was speaking of you."

It stiffens Halfmoon, halts him in his tracks. His eyes are on Bravo and I can see that while he feared this he didn't believe it and was unready for the worst. In a very weak voice, he says, "Poor Bravo. We was too late to help him. Did he say who shot him?"

"Not exactly, but as good as said. He

said: Tell Halfmoon to watch out. Sarg's comin' to kill."

Halfmoon brightens. "Sure! That's like Bravo an' it's like Sarg to brag what he planned for me before driving lead through a disarmed man. Too bad Bravo couldn't have known what really happened when Sarg did come."

"I told him, Halfmoon. But he only shook his head an' repeated the warning. You don't reckon. . . ."

I never voice the question devilin' me at that moment. A scream, shrill with terror, sheers in from the sittin' room. Halfmoon flinches, like he'd been struck. But the instincts of fifty years of violence unshackle him quick. His hand slaps his holster an' comes up gun-filled. He pivots an' one long leap takes him through the door he's just entered.

FROM where I'm standin' beside the bed, I can't see a thing. I don't need to. Snarlin' guns are shakin' that ranch-house. Halfmoon comes rockin' back into the bedroom on his heels an' the way he goes down tells me he's hard hit.

I have a split second of indecision, as the feller says. But there's nothin' wrong with my bump of caution. My gun slides out. From the sittin' room comes a cat snarl. "Another yell like that and I'll drop you, woman! Peggy, throw some clothes in a grip and come with me."

"Wh—where?" The frightened girl chokes it out.

"Where? What difference where? Wherever I feel like. That man just got me and my men in his house an' blew us up. You hear me, blew us sky high. Killed us all. . . . except me. I was saved because I was underground, in a secret tunnel. My men are dead. I'm gettin' out of here for awhile and Peggy's going with me. . . ."

"Over my dead body," says her mother, savage.

"Then that's what it's going to be, woman. . . ."

I don't wait for more. Two steps take me to the open window. I step through, circle the house to the front an' fill the doorway. Sarg's standin' with his right shoulder to me. He's dirty an' ragged an' there's a crazy expression on his sharp face as he lifts his gun against the woman he's already widowed. I speak just one word: "Osworth!"

I'm scarcely ready for his swift move. Snarling like a cat, he ducks an' pivots an' swings his gun, all in one explosive burst. His bullet chips the door jamb on my right. Mine finds his heart.

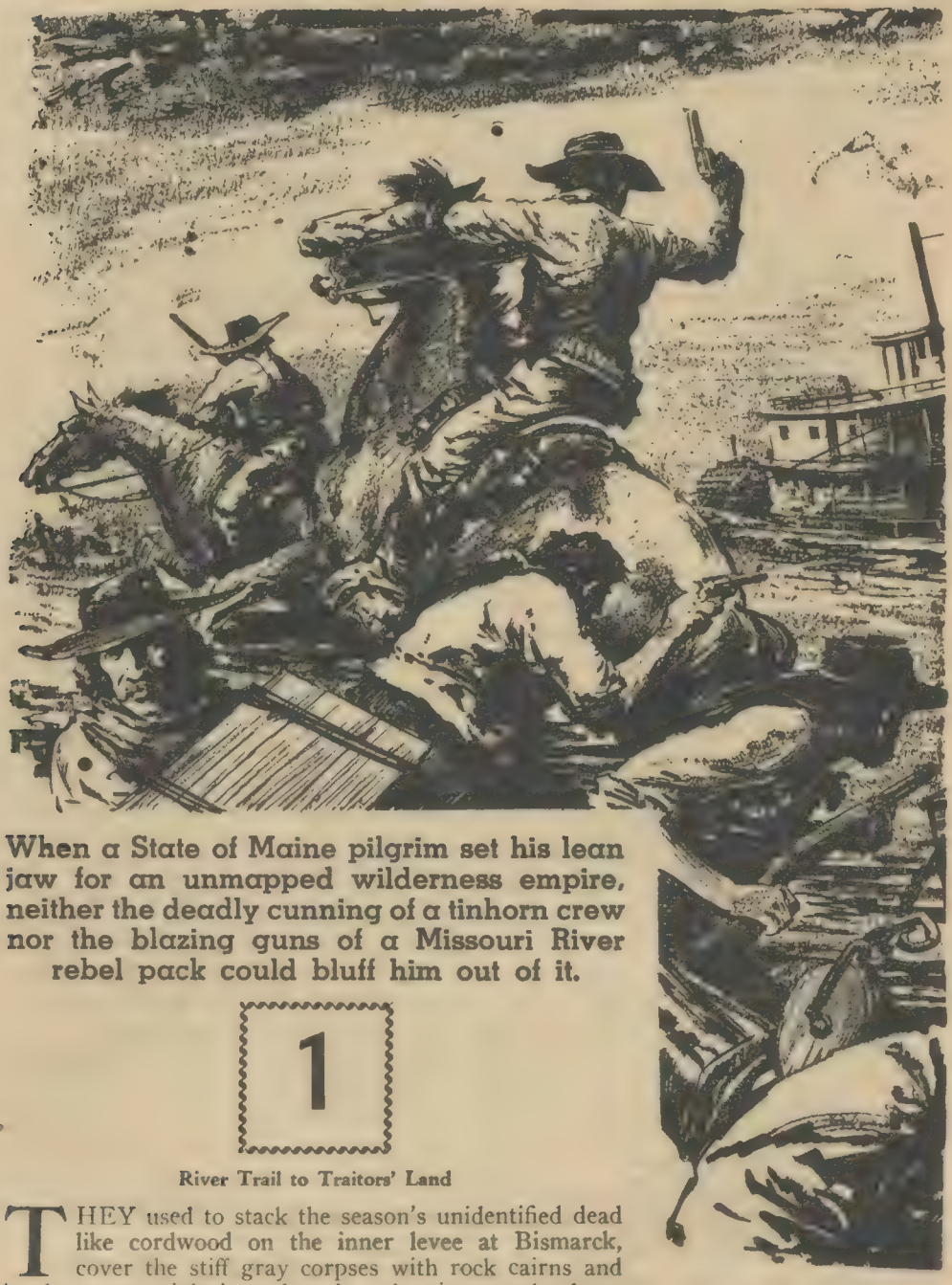
I leap across his body an' go to Halfmoon. He ain't dead, but it won't be long. The two women come in an' kneel with me, cryin' an' carryin' on like women will an' should, I reckon. Presently Red Barton comes with the medico from Oro Grande. The doc takes one look at the wound an' opines it's a matter of minutes.

While the doctor is doin' what he can, with Missus Merrick helpin'; an' while young Red is holdin' Peggy, wipin' away her tears an' comfortin' her, I feel superfluous. I step out into the night to smoke a cigarette. Hassan comes up an' tells me plain as in word that he's got travel in his hoofs an' is for gettin' further. I shift the rig from the bronc I rode here, step up into Hassan's middle an' spur him

Why should I tarry? The friends I come to see are dead, an' I'm glad it's both an' not just Bravo. After their life pardnership, loneliness would be the greater cruelty. Young Red will marry Peggy an' run the Circle X. An' as for the Crescent Star, the brand will soon be forgotten. Panoche Meadows will have its ghosts, its memories an' its wild loneliness. An' me—somewhere there must be a place to light.

Slow it down, Hassan. The trail's long an' tomorrow's another day.

THE RIVER OF



When a State of Maine pilgrim set his lean jaw for an unmapped wilderness empire, neither the deadly cunning of a tinhorn crew nor the blazing guns of a Missouri River rebel pack could bluff him out of it.

1

River Trail to Traitors' Land

THEY used to stack the season's unidentified dead like cordwood on the inner levee at Bismarck, cover the stiff gray corpses with rock cairns and let the stony weight bear them into the viscous mire from

FEAR

By GEORGE C. APPELL

The *Queen* sunk lower in the mud as Koch's crew fired. . . .

which they had been spewed. For the dead would come down the river on the spring thaw—those that floated past Fort Berthold and the Knife River and Washburn—and bump ominously against the dock pilings at Bismarck until boat hooks took them in and they were stacked under the cairns. Trappers, for the most part, these unknown men; trappers and an occasional surveyor and sometimes a land agent. Men who had been tossed from bullboats or been drowned off the banks; men who had crossed wandering Indians and men from the upper reaches of the Missouri, where the ice freezes six feet thick and preserves flesh until, come thaw, it releases the bodies and sends them spinning lazily down-stream.

Hannibal Husted thought the weather, that night, was worse than what was under the levee he squatted on. The October afternoon had been pale and cold, with a threat of snow in it; but the night wrapped itself in chill mists that seeped down the trough of the river and made fuzzy blobs of bright shorefront lamps and obscured Bismarck altogether.

The mists stifled the shouts of stevedores loading the *Western Queen* at the Dock Street slip and seemed to strangle the shriek of the steamer's whistle as she called her men to work.

Come dawn she'd thrust up-river for Berthold, ninety treacherous miles to the north; and because she was the last boat of the year, she'd try to make it to Fort Peck if the ice didn't come in, which it probably would.

Hannibal Husted shivered behind his rock cairn and sniffed the stench of the riverfront. It was compounded of rats, dead and alive; of damp burlap and new tar and old paint. Of steam and woodsmoke and baking loaves.

The loaves reminded Hannibal of home, where each Thursday the women folk did the weeks' baking. It saddened him, that thought of home, because it was eighteen hundred miles east, in Maine. Maine—no part of it—had ever been like Bismarck.

The *Western Queen's* bellow smothered the voices of stevedores and struck Hannibal's ears and almost knocked him off balance. He braced his knees against the lumpy rocks, placed a palm to his forehead and swept back the brown hair that seemed always to be tumbling over his face. "Cornshuck," they'd called him when he was a kid. In the Army it had been "Knobby." Ask anyone in Sam Chamberlain's Volunteers who Knobby was, and you'd get "The long feller in Company C, the one needs some mowin' on his hair. But don't play cards with him; he can read right through 'em. . . ."

Hannibal Husted had just witnessed a murder, which was why he hugged the levee cairns. He had come to learn in his thirty-two years that murder is best done without witnesses, especially if you happen to be one of the witnesses.

It is further desirable to stay away from the corpse, although in this case Hannibal couldn't help it. The corpse was being carried to him.

TWO shapes were picking their way across the creaking stringpieces that led from the foot of the high bank under the town out to the levees. They were chipping words back and forth, feeling secure in the heavy mists. "Hold on, one of his feet slipped" . . . "Careful ahead—the cairns commence" . . . "I got a gun out, just'n case. . . ."

Hannibal Husted had no gun. He had nothing but the ragged clothes he squatted in; those, and the mouldering transfer of title in his pocket. But he did have a monstrous hunger, a deep thirst and a throbbing desire to get up-river and claim his land. It lay between the Little Missouri and the Knife, and if he didn't stake-out within two months—before January 1st, 1881—it would be anybody's. In the public domain, old Judge Thrasher back in Biddeford had told him.

The two men, the corpse swaying between them, landed on the levee where the bodies were and lowered their dead man to the mud.

Hannibal of a sudden had to sneeze. He grabbed his nose and drew in a deep, lung-cracking breath and heard his ears squeak. His hair spilled down over his eyes and tickled his cold cheeks.

One of the two men rasped something. Both shapes stiffened. "You hear somethin'?" The question was whisper-high and rowel-sharp.

"Not 'less one of them gents has decided to rejoin the livin'." There was the snick of a gun hammer being thumbed back.

From the near distance came the calls of stevedores, the clacking of hatches and the steady, monotonous, *whine-wheenk . . . whine-wheenk* of block and falls. Hannibal could discern the *Queen's* shape by the way her dim deck lights lay. Half an hour earlier, when he'd been about to sneak aboard, he had seen her lines more clearly. But that was also when he had witnessed the murder on her afterdeck.

So he had traded space for time with soldier-like alacrity.

Then his nostrils sizzled and his head tightened and the sneeze exploded like grapeshot.

The two shapes whirled and dropped to half-height. "Stand up slow." It was a hollow voice, drum-deep and even. "You're covered both ways."

There was nothing else to do. Hannibal, pushing himself off his wet knees, was unaccountably reminded of the time near Rafter's Run when he'd been up a tree stuffing his shirt with crabapples. A Reb sergeant had appeared with the same command in his mouth, only in reverse: "Come down fast."

The shapes rose and moved forward. Hannibal smelled the sweet-metal stench of raw whiskey and the rancid dryness of ripe sweat.

"Hold out your hands—empty."

A rawhide lash snagged around his bony wrists and jerked tight and was yanked forward. He stumbled with it.

"Now then—explain yourself."

"To who?"

A hand arced out of the grayness and smashed Hannibal's mouth and belted him backward.

The rawhide tightened and he was hauled forward again. "I'll ask the questions, Yank. Where'd you collect that mouth full o' nutmegs?"

"In Maine, mister." Hannibal tongued his lips and tasted salt. "Where folks use their hands to shake with."

Only twice before had he known anger like this, and once had been when the Reb sergeant confiscated his crabapples. So the boy from Biddeford had neatly tripped the sergeant against the tree, spun him face down and tied him securely with a CSA belting.

So the man from Maine did the same thing now: he snaked out a leg, caught Drum-deep behind the heel and half-revolved him, then used his foot like a fist and punched the man onto his face. He leapt and had the gun in his lashed hands and held it on the man who was drawing.

"That's far enough."

The *Queen's* whistle droned startlingly and Hannibal grasped Drum-deep by the back of the belt to use him as a shield.

The other man fired. The shot slocked into Drum-deep. He gasped and sagged and Hannibal let him topple onto his face. Hannibal squeezed one off, aim awry because of tied wrists. The other man wheeled and flung himself at the stringpiece and hurdled the corpse he had carried and sprinted along the planking toward the bank.

Hannibal Husted knelt by Drum-deep. The man was inhaling and exhaling erratically, legs drawn up to his stomach. "I think you're more mad than hurt, bullfrog." Hannibal said.

He sat on the squirming bulk, raised his hands to his bleeding mouth and went to work with his teeth on the lashing. He let the gun hang from a little finger by its trigger guard.

It was good to possess a gun again. Hannibal had pawned his own a month before in St. Paul, in order to eat; and a month before that, in Chicago, he'd pawned his extra suit of clothes. In Albany, it had been his watch and chain. It takes a lot of parlaying to get from Biddeford to Bismarck, even with the dangerous luck of an occasional stolen ride on a railroad car. Judge Thrasher's stake had run out much sooner than was expected.

He was nibbling at the last knot when he noted the corpse's clothing. It was a light check, black-and-white. Hannibal Husted shook his hands free and stuck the gun in his belt and threw a half-hitch around one of Drum-deep's gesticulating wrists and looped the rawhide across and down to the man's boots.

"They'll find you come sunlight, bullfrog. . . . Here's somethin' to chew on so's you won't holler an' wake everyone up. You'll be warm enough, though I got high doubts about that gentleman yonder."

HANNIBAL came awake fast, with no memory of sleep. He was on a cot in a small, white-painted cabin and every-

thing seemed in motion. A decanter in a wall ring shivered; green-dyed burlap curtains quivered. The cot was pulsing gently.

Below was the thump of pistons and the *chung! chung!* of wooden blades biting water. Hannibal rolled off the cot, planted his feet wide and examined himself in the sallow morning light that washed through the glass port behind the parted green curtains. Somewhere a rope slatted and a cable creaked; the *shush-shush-shush* of cinders striking clinker screens came from above. A man was snoring next door. The window hook tinkled musically, dangling free.

A stained mirror held to the bulkhead by four rusty nails reflected the thin face and slumbrous blue eyes and tousled hair of the man from Maine. His lip was swollen. He dove for his gun.

It was under his muddy weskit, where he'd tucked it the night before out on the burial levee. He probed for his papers and found them inside his shirt. He felt better. He removed the checkered coat and struggled out of the checkered breeches and poured water from the decanter into a pewter basin. His razor, comb and soap were in his stocking tops, where he always carried them.

The man next door stopped snoring, and presently feet struck decking and the broken-slate clatter of an immense belch sounded. It was followed by a satisfied grunt.

Hannibal told the mirror as he washed, "Pretty good, I'd reckon. You get to Bismarck a freight bum lookin' to sneak aboard an' stow up-river. Now you got a gun, a suit of clothes an' a cabin. Also, b'gosh, a wallet with money!"

He remembered the captain of the *Western Queen,* the night before. Man with a name like a mouthful of gravel. . . . Quarles, it was. Captain Quarles. Stocky feller with mustaches. The captain had turned Hannibal over to Mr. Niggles, the ship's clerk. Mr. Niggles, in Hannibal's opinion, was a tired chipmunk who could speak English.

"How far you wish to go?" the clerk had husked.

"Fort Berthold." From Berthold, Hannibal had discovered, he could follow-out the Little Missouri to Beaver Creek. It said so among the papers of Jno. E. Brackenfall, Esq., Surveyor & Assayer. Brackenfall had suspended his plumb line over every quarter-section between the Little Missouri and the Knife, judging from the onionskin overlays in his clothing. The land at the headwaters of the Knife, where the delta fingers out westward like veins in a leaf, would pan out at thirty dollars a day. Brackenfall had dotted in the suspected trace of a lode between that delta and the Little Missouri. It angled down from Killdeer Mountain. A thorough man, Jno. E. Brackenfall.

Hannibal saluted his memory, as he finished policing himself up. He had never suspected that his land might be so valuable. It came as a shock to him —even these fifteen years afterward—that Owen Koch would deal land like that into a poker game by a campfire in the Shenandoah Valley. Maybe, though, it has been Hannibal's kid look. Seventeen, he'd been. Knobby, from Company C. Cards, when they forgot, asked Knobby what was on the other side of them. That's what anybody in Chamberlain's Volunteers would tell you, leastways.

Hannibal put on his clothing. He wondered what had happened to the man who had run away; he wondered if Drum-deep was still among the cairns in Bismarck. Drum-deep should be dead. Drum-deep had tip-toed along the afterdeck of the *Western Queen* the night before and slung a stone into the current. Brackenfall had stared that way and Drum-deep had sunk a bone-hilted knife into the man and caught him and tumbled him overside to the other, waiting on the shadow side of the loading jetty. That's when Hannibal had traded space for time. It was up that very shadowed side that he had planned to shinny.

A hell-tunket of a time for a man to be claiming his land. Hadn't wanted the stuff overly-much anyway, 'til ol' Thrasher said, "You got to. You can sell it an' build up your farm. But you got to be there to claim it."

The day became brighter, though no warmer. Hannibal squinted through the window and across the narrow deck and saw brown shores sliding south. A rabbit flopped from some cottonwoods and flew from sight.

"Hell of a place to lay stone fence." Hannibal unlocked his door and opened it. "No stones."

He collided with the man who was stepping from the next cabin and it was like walking into a bull.

The man had dark eyebrows and a dark mustache but his broad face was flushed from drinking. "We remind me, seh, of the pelican and the owl, neither of which could drink from the other's bowl . . . After you, seh." The man was slightly drunk and enjoying it hugely. In the corridor leading to the main saloon he explained that he had been drunk for thirty days, while on leave from Fort Peck. At the plank table in the main saloon he admitted that he was Major Claflin Hewes, 6th Cavalry.

He admitted further that he was sobering up; he popped plump fingers at a steward and called for brandy in his coffee.

YVONNE

HANNIBAL HUSTED gazed out at the River of Fear, as he had heard it called a day east of Bismarck, when he'd left the shadow of a water tank and approached the engineer of the stopped train and offered to cut wood for a ride to the river.

"The Mizzoura?" The engineer spat. "A dirty old man, the Mizzoura. Look u't f'r him. . . . Sure, take holt of an axe, there, an' start swingin'. . . ."

Major Hewes hitched his bulk around and sat more easily in his wrinkled broadcloth. "Only thing wrong with a leave is"—a rolling eye caught a figure entering the saloon—"you don't get another one for two years . . . If I may, miss?"

She was wearing a tight orange shawl that made her tanned face seem smaller and her large eyes larger. They were impertinent eyes; they didn't match her elkskins nor the fringed skirt. She sat next to the major and across from Hannibal. She silently accused Hannibal of leering at her, then gazed acidly at Hewes. "A drummer, I take it?"

"Drummer? No, ma'am, though I've beat a few in my time. Like the time we were surrounded by howlin' savages and I beat my chest—like this—and they thought it was a tom-tom callin' them back for—"

"A preacher, then?" That crack was for Hannibal. She lifted a fist and summoned a steward. "Venison chop—two. Coffee, black." She was laughing a low laugh that sounded to Hannibal like the chuckle of the mill-race on the Thrasher farm.

Hannibal choked. He lowered his face and his hair tumbled into his plate.

She stopped laughing. "Here, hack at it with this!" She snagged out a knife, spun it around hilt-first, caught it and held it.

He felt blood wash up through his neck. Last time he'd been embarrassed was when he'd been saying good-night to Miss Maryann Thrasher, walking with head over his shoulder, not looking where he was going. He'd tripped into the pigsty and landed on his face between two porkers.

The bone hilt was leveled on Hannibal Husted like an accusing finger. "I thank you, mum." He had to face down again but this time he kept one hand at the ready near his hair. He had to face down

again because the last time he'd seen that hilt was the night before, on the after deck of this boat, sinking into Brackenfall.

The major stumbled toward the rescue, bent on salvaging what he could of his new friend's frayed dignity. "You're no preacher . . . Miss, please put that thing away! You seem more the soldier type to me." The major drained his coffee mug, braced and got the decision over a belch.

Hannibal waited until the knife was out of sight in her soft elkskins. "I'm a farmer."

Nobody said anything while her vension chops came; nobody said anything while two men sauntered into the saloon and stood against the wall surveying the diners.

The major managed, "Well, well."

"You don't carry your secrets too well," she was saying. "What'll you plant out here—seeds of revolt?"

Hannibal saw the handsomer of the two men lower his hands. The man's hard good looks matched his elegant clothing—the blaze of a weskit, the straight hang of coat flares. Hannibal half-turned and stared directly at the second of the two men. That man's face was like chalk, his eyes wide. It was as if he had seen the ghost of a man he had murdered.

Hannibal faced forward and finished his coffee. "Miss, talk of revolt seems idle, somehow."

"Does it?" The question was blade sharp.

Claflin Hewes lost the next decision and belched and inclined his jowls to the girl and started to apologize.

She ignored him. "Why, farmer boy?" Amusement was coming down over the green lights of those luminous eyes.

"Well . . . I mean." Lamely—"We had ol' Aaron Burr." He coughed. "I'd think a man"—from his side teeth—"would be a fool to try it again."

The handsome man left the wall and seated himself; the other man perched on a stool at the common table where the deckers ate.

MAJOR HEWES cleared his throat, rolled his eyes and folded his napkin.

"Heard talk of it all down the river—all down the Miss', where I spent most my leave. Never heard such gabble in my born days."

The handsome man leaned forward. "Gabble of what sort, Major Hewes?"

"Of stakin' out an independent country up-river. I tell you, the cavalry would never allow it!" He heaved himself from the table, to the bar and thumped for service.

The handsome man's lips twisted. He ordered "Whatever you had, my dear".

The girl said, "Venison."

Seven bells echoed brassily through the *Western Queen,* and the deck passengers started shuffling into the saloon.

Hannibal cocked forward, ready to rise.

"A moment, please." The man next to the girl was smiling again. "I never proffer a compliment without first introducing myself. My name is Hawley York . . . That suit you're wearing, it's of excellent material."

"Thanks, York." Hannibal was half up.

"You obtained it . . . on the river?" Contempt raced across York's features. "Or perhaps a gentleman doesn't discuss those things before sunset. Coffee, please. Yvonne—more coffee?"

Hannibal paraded the deck without seeing the passing shore, without feeling the icy lash of the wind that moaned down from the north country. There was fear in him now.

He stopped by a half-closed cabin port that had curtains drawn over it. Cabin No. 3, he thought it was.

"You dirty little Canuck!" York's voice was swollen with rage. "You can't be trusted alone—even at breakfast! Like back in Bism k in the hotel lobby with Brackenfall! Sliding those fine eyes of yours—"

Yvonne laughed, taunting him. "Maybe I like that fine checkered suit, Hawley. It's better than anything you ever bought me!"

"Come here!" The meaty smack of flesh on flesh rapped through the port. "You're over-due for a lesson in manners!"

"Let go my wrist!" Her gasp was loud.

York snapped; "That fine checkered suit'll be under the ground yet and"—his feet scraped—"you deserve to be with it!"

There was the tinny creak of collapsing bed springs and Yvonne's cat-snarl pierced Hannibal's ears. York's voice choked off—then came the sounds of smashing glass and a body falling.

Yvonne hissed, "I still can use my feet and knees, Uncle Hawley. Ha!" The

small sound of a foot kicking a body sounded. "Get up and get out! I want to lie down before lunch."

HANNIBAL turned and ambled toward the main saloon. He wasn't a day drinker nor did he enjoy it overly at night, but now he wanted to see the major. Maybe the major would know some more about this fool talk of a republic up the river. But Hewes wasn't in the saloon.

"Whiskey, neat," Hannibal ordered.

A voice said, "Make it two."

Hawley York added, "If you don't object, of course."

"I've drunk with lots of folks, York."

Hawley York drew a hand the length of his mustache. "You don't seem too familiar with the river. . . . A stranger, perhaps?" York stared at that checkered suit.

"The Missouri, York, is"—Hannibal shuddered as the liquor hit his stomach—"a dirty old man."

"That so?" York smiled at the pasty-faced man who had come to breakfast with him. "What does it remind you of, Tyler?"

Tyler Coles leaned on the bar. He said, "Half-naked men, hidin' on levees."

"I'd supposed levees were for corpses." York shook his head unbelievingly. He edged closer to Hannibal's right arm; Coles pressed against his left. "The river," York intoned, "always reminds me of bloated bodies bumping against the cabin rafters of sunken steamers. Doesn't it you, Tyler?" Then, suddenly: "Bartender, give Mr. Husted another drink."

"No, thanks." Hannibal said softly.

York was shocked. "What? You won't drink with traveling companions? Bartender!"

Coles' eyes came around to Hannibal and Hannibal was forced to shake a flabby hand. "Surveyor, maybe?" Coles' breath was stale, as if he hadn't opened his mouth wide in a long time.

Hannibal backed off slightly. He wished Major Hewes would come in.

"Per'aps a surveyor." Mechanically he picked up the shot glass. He drank the whiskey without offering a toast. He wished he was back in Maine harvesting, and bedamned to thirteen thousand square miles of land he'd won in a poker game.

The rough spout of a sneeze rasped from the corridor and Claflin Hewes presented himself briskly. "Damned near dozed through my pre-prandial drink . . . Bartender, if you'll fulfill your function on earth?"

York and Coles had to stand aside to admit the major's firm bulk to the bar. The girl came in and Hannibal faced her and got a little excited at the way she swung her slender hips.

She mock-saluted him, face bright and friendly. "Hope you weren't hurt when I offered you a barbering tool at breakfast."

Hawley York seemed pleased about something. "M'dear, this is Mr. Husted. Mr. Husted, this is Miss Calkins." York touched his mouth with a fist. "My niece."

Lunch was announced and Hannibal and the major, York and Coles, sat to it with Yvonne Calkins.

Something had happened that morning, and it had happened to Hannibal Husted. He was being accepted now; they liked him. When Tyler Coles was swabbing his face with a napkin and Major Hewes was delicately pouring brandy into his coffee, Hawley York asked casually, "Where'll you survey, Mr. Husted? Yellowstone country?"

"Not exactly. I'm goin' to lay out my own land."

Everyone held his breath a moment. The dark brown river slid past the ports, supple-swift and gleaming evilly. It was battling the *Queen*, slamming against her, weighing hard into her wide bows. And always the *Queen* hammered back.

York asked, "Where?"

The major emptied his cup; Coles lowered his napkin. Yvonne Calkins swung sideways in her chair, clawed fingers deep in her palms.

"Southwest of Fort Berthold. I got me thirteen thousand square miles there." Hannibal said it proudly.

Coles kept a hand in his coat despite York's head-shake. Yvonne swung forward, eyes terrible. Claflin Hewes rose and went to the bar; he didn't like to see tenderfeet get fleeced in a card game, and from the major's experience that was about to happen.

"Why, Mr. Husted!" York stuck out a hand. "How nice! We may"—Hannibal couldn't see the man's off-side wink at Coles and Yvonne—"be neighbors."

Hannibal felt a little better. The empty miles didn't seem so bad.

But it was difficult for him to believe—he did not wish to believe—all the things he had heard and that Hewes said he had heard as far south as the Mississippi's reaches. Things having to do with bastard republics up-river and the taking of public lands from the United States. Treason had been mentioned; treason and its illegitimate brat—murder.

THERE had been enough of such fifteen years before, and it was supposed to be ended for good and all at Appomattox. Hannibal Husted wanted no more of it. He had left a snug farm to fight for the United States, and then he had returned to his farm. And now he was away from that farm again and he wanted no more fighting.

Hannibal asked, "You live near-by?"

"Oh yes. My—hum—niece and I, and my friend Mr. Coles—we have a ranch up in the bend. We're going into winter quarters and try to save some stock. . . . We must save that stock, eh, Tyler?"

"We will." Coles' face was expressionless.

Hannibal wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Maybe you know my friend Owen Koch? He's the one gave me the land."

Coles' arm stiffened in his coat; the color drained from Hawley York's skin.

Yvonne found her voice. "This friend—gave you the land?"

Hannibal raised his shoulders. "Thing is, we had a friendly game, some of the boys in ol' C, an' Owen—"

"Old C?" York's voice was gruff.

"Company C, Chamberlain's Maine. Anyway, we were waitin' to pack for home, an' I had occasion to reduce Owen to nothin' but this title. He transferred it to me, by the time the fire was down an' the other studs had dropped out." Hannibal noted the frozen masks ringing him; he felt Claflin Hewes' incredulous stare. There was challenge to it all, and Hannibal didn't mind a challenge. "Koch said it was only good for fifteen years, the transfer." Hannibal wiped hair from his forehead and was suddenly glad he had a gun. The gun he'd taken from Drum-deep on the levee was a Colt '73. A Peacemaker, they called it.

Tyler Coles' arm relaxed; the color reappeared in York's face. Major Hewes turned to the bar.

A monstrous uneasiness of soul entered Hannibal Husted and he thrust himself from the table and ambled past the deckers' plank and slammed outside into the icy rush of the afternoon winds.

Captain Quarles eased the massive wheel to port a spoke to stay in the main channel. They'd raise Washburn soon, and the captain was reminded to call Mr. Niggles and the mate, Mr. Tibbetts. They would have to pass the word to the deckers coming aboard at Washburn that the *Western Queen* would never get through to Fort Peck; and they would pass the further word that no fares would be refunded because of the steamer's failure to reach Berthold.

The captain sniffed snow, "Mr. Niggles, it's a race between us and the weather to Berthold. Peck's out of the question."

"Yessir."

Quarles thought of another thing, a matter that had been haunting the back closets of his consciousness since they'd cleared Bismarck. "You sure John Brackenfall didn't take his cabin?"

"Yessir." Mr. Niggles shivered. "He bought it ashore, but he never come aboard. Not's far as I know . . . I'll pass the word to Mr. Tibbetts."

Quarles frowned over that. His friend John E. Brakenfall was supposed to have made this final trip of the year in order to winter at Fort Berthold and sell his services to the owner of the Killdeer Claim come spring. It was a question of first-come-

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first-served. But Brackenfall had not come, and a gangling, snub-nosed stranger had taken his cabin at the last minute. It puzzled the captain, and the captain did not like puzzlement any more than he liked violence.

Maybe Brackenfall had heard rumors of this republic, and had backed out. The rumors were all over the river—that the dregs of the late Indian Wars, the sutlers and gamblers and traders, were planning to occupy the area between the Little Missouri, the Missouri and the Knife; and that they would fortify during the snows an be in a position to dicker with the government in the spring. Cavalry couldn't move in Dakota's winter. Not in the winter that was promising to present itself in full force soon.

Quarles wriggled in his greatcoat and licked frost from the underside of his mustache.

Brackenfall had said something about taking a survey map and an assay report to Berthold with him. Such would be invaluable to anyone wishing to stake-out that land—more valuable than life. Papers like that would represent a year's work.

More valuable than Brackenfall's life!

The captain shivered; and had to wrench the wheel to starboard to avoid a snag that barely missed the *Queen*.

HANNIBAL Husted, treading the deck and sniffling, was brought sharp around by the port glass of Cabin No. 3 whining open on its hinges. The green curtains snapped apart and Yvonne's face appeared between them. "Hey, farmer." There was no derision in it. "Come here."

Hannibal faced aft, impelled by warning instinct. The deckers were blanket-shrouded lumps. He stepped to the port. "Thought you were takin' lunch."

She kept her voice low. "I was, until Uncle Hawley lost the key to the cabin." Her smile was sallow. "Maybe you could open the door for me. I can't fix the overhead lamp, either. It broke, somehow."

"Where's your Uncle"—he swallowed stiffly—"Hawley?"

"Trying to get a card game together . . . Would you mind?" Her eyebrows curved upward.

Hannibal peered forlornly at the checkered suit John Brackenfall had been wearing when murdered, and he remembered that Yvonne had pretended to admire it and the man who had been in it.

"Scared?" The curtains came farther apart. Her brows went down doubtfully.

It was eight paces to the cabin corridor and four paces to Cabin No. 3. Hannibal had to work in the semi-darkness of the passageway and he fumbled frequently. He couldn't seem to get a solid grip on the small brass door knob. He hoped Hawley York wouldn't come. Then he got his grip, bent, twisted, put his forearms into it and heard the metallic *thuck!* of sprung metal.

He stepped over the foot-transom and stood inside. "Where's the lamp?"

Her forefinger went up. "Something hit the wall this morning, and the lamp came down . . . . Look out."

He brushed shattered glass aside with a foot. "Needs a new chimney, that's all." He reached upward, and his checkered sleeves caught hard under his triceps.

Brackenfall had had a short torso.

Hannibal's hands stopped, three inches from the lamp frame.

"Here. Let me get another chimney from a steward." She glanced into the passageway, glanced left and right, then crept out.

Hannibal went up on tip-toe and his fingers barely brushed the frame. He lowered himself to his heels, and pushed again at the shattered glass. York must have struck hard against that wall; Hannibal had heard the glass smash.

She came back with a chimney and gave it to him. Again he tried to reach the frame, and couldn't.

"Let me hold your coat, then your arms will be free." She held out her arms.

He froze in position, his neck muscles went cold. Instinctively his hand slid to the papers in his coat. A glimmering awareness of their worth was beginning to flicker through him.

"I'll hold your coat." Her hands moved closer to the back of his shoulders.

Would she snake out those papers and run to Hawley York? He decided she wouldn't. Not because of what happened this morning, but because the thing would be too open, too obvious, and too early. He could have slipped the papers into his weskit, but he didn't.

He took off his coat and handed it to her; he accepted the glass chimney and screwed it into the frame. He lowered himself and stood arms-back while she held the coat open. He dipped his arms into the sleeves, tugged the front together and felt for the papers in the inner pocket. They were still there. "I'll go now."

She followed him to the transom. "Thank you. One good turn deserves another." She followed him into the passage. "I don't like being a prisoner."

He turned toward Hewes' cabin. "I don't like seeing people in prison."

CLAFLIN Hewes, peering through his cabin window, saw the snag twisting past and he shuddered in his belly meat. Like many professional soldiers he was constantly afraid of the little things that can interfere with routine of peaceable existence—of being thrown from a horse, of drowning; of burning to death in a post fire. Of succumbing to pneumonia, of getting killed by a stray shot on the practice range. But he was not afraid of death in battle and he was fighting his last battle now and he alone understood that.

The years were all behind Claflin Hewes, his time had about run out, and there was nothing he could do but face it without flinching. Sixty-odd, now, and with his gilt-threaded major's leaves moss-green with age. Promotion is rare in the slow Army runway, and Hewes no longer sought it. Two wives were behind him—one in the cemetery at Fort Randall and one in the shadow-dappled memorial park at Cairo. A son lay under Antietam's churned soil.

So there was little to do but drink as politely as possible and try not to look too long at the thin file of troopers that constituted the Fort Berthold garrison; for when he saw that command there rose in his weary eyes that faint echo of other commands he'd had and would never have again.

Commands with battalions of cavalry flung far onto the flanks, screening regiments of infantry that trudged ahead of artillery that lurched through the dust with chains growling and balk ends cracking, the whole advancing along a three-mile front to the rhythmic crash of brass as field music piped the way. Claflin Hewes, Major-General, USA....Hewes shrugged.

He had heard the knock but dimly; and when it rapped again he turned from the window and brought himself back to the present and faced fear of the future. "Come in." He must be jovial now, must be a good fellow. Maybe this would be the man from Maine, that one that seemed to be headed for trouble with the sharpers aboard.

And it was. Hannibal Husted closed the door behind him. He came straight to the point, after the manner of his kind. "I got to know some things, an' you're an army officer."

Hewes didn't ask him why he was whispering. Hewes whispered himself. "What things? Sit down there on the settee." Somewhat like his son might have been, the major reflected. Straight up-and-down and not too much bone meat. A little too curious, perhaps; and that would be to cover the shyness. People like that are always out-of-place, no matter where they are. A farmer, this one. A farmer wrestling with the Missouri Valley.

"It's all through the boat." Hannibal waited for the major to ask what. But the major didn't because he didn't have to. Hannibal said, "I smell a blight comin'. I don't reckon on losin' my crops."

Hewes sat down. "Don't play cards with 'em. And don't let 'em get you drunk. Me, now—why once I was nimble at the pasteboards, but no more."

"It's somethin' else." Hannibal didn't know how to say this, because he was not given to saying much on any subject and it was abhorrent to him to have to take a comparative stranger into his confidences. "It's—well, I think I got their land."

"Whose land?" The major had suspected it, had feared it; and had hoped it was not so.

The major had hoped it wasn't so because there was little that he could do about preventing it. If the man York or his friend Coles guessed Hewes' suspicions, Hewes would end up in the clutch of the river. So would Husted. Hewes asked, "Why'd your friend make the transfer good for only fifteen years?"

"I don't know." Hannibal sounded tired. Owen Koch—a dim voice and a faintly-limned face in the shadows of gone years—had always laughed about taking

part of the country for his own. We fought for it, Hannibal, so let's grab our share! Owen Koch, crisp of hair and wild of eye and fast with his big hands. Hannibal hadn't seen him or heard of him since Chamberlain's Maine had disbanded at Portland. Koch had said he was going west with a wagon train; his father had lived in the Missouri country once, he'd told Hannibal. Hannibal returned to his farm near Biddeford.

"My strictly dark-hole guess is that"—the major held it, aware of a footfall in the corridor; the voices had stopped. "He figured the Indians'd be cleared out inside fifteen years. Meanwhile, anything that happened to reduce the land value, such as flood an' fire, would be on your head." The major turned up his palms. "Only a guess, of course, but I used to be handy with the pasteboards myself, an' I know the men who use 'em."

Hannibal gathered himself and stood up. . . .

"You know me?" Hannibal was half-paying attention to Hewes.

Hewes smiled sadly. "I'd say you planned to take the whole pot, but never the whole card game. This friend of yours—he planned it ahead, fifteen years ahead. Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"He's not aboard?"

Hannibal shook his head. Owen Koch was not among the deckers nor was he a cabin passenger. There were but five of those—himself and Hewes, Hawley York and Tyler Coles; and Yvonne Calkins. He guessed Coles and York must be sharing a cabin. But hadn't he seen York emerge from No. 3 after breakfast? And Yvonne step from it before lunch?

Claflin Hewes asked, "What's the name of the your claim?"

"Killdeer."

The major knew the territory. Rotten with gold, he'd heard. He was about to say, "Lock it up in the ship's safe."

Knuckles hit the door panel and Hawley York stepped in and bowed briefly. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but I thought to while away the afternoon. If a little poker might me—"

The *Queen* lurched sickeningly to port and the whistle screamed and everyone clawed for balance. Then she righted and a voice from the Texas deck cried, "Washburn!" and York backed away. "Hadn't realized we were here. Perhaps later this evening, gentlemen."

2

Farmer From Hell

MR. NIGGLES and cadaverous Mr. Tibbetts, the mate, repeated their chorused warnings about Fort Peck and Berthold, but the deckers streamed up the plank just the same. Captain Quarles had never seen so many men file aboard at this mill town, nor had he seen so much cargo. Flour was all that went up-river, usually; but today there were crates stenciled MACHINERY and boxes labeled FARM EQUIPMENT.

The deckers were blank-faced and stolid, like mountain men. They paid Mr. Niggles a dollar apiece for a blanket and filed aft and joined the others. The clerk took in forty-three dollars before the plank was lowered.

Then Washburn's jetties were growing small in the foaming wake of the *Western Queen* and stewards were starting saloon lamps and two bells chimed through the cabins and someone said, "Five o'clock."

"We tie-up at eight, please," the bartender told the main saloon.

Hawley York wanted to know, "When do we pass Knife River?"

"Tomorrow afternoon, sir."

Hannibal Husted felt the uneasiness again; it crawled up his spine and settled into the base of his skull and remained there, an accusing thing. He was sitting with Yvonne and Major Hewes. Yvonne was very friendly, very friendly indeed.

Then it occurred to Hannibal that the Knife River flowed from the heart of his land, and that its delta reached toward Killdeer Mountain. Brackenfall had delineated that on his onionskin survey with sure precision. Hannibal touched his coat and made sure of the papers. He sat back in his chair and made sure of his gun.

He glanced at Major Hewes; the major was eyeing Yvonne.

Yvonne faced up to Hawley York as he stepped from the bar and sat down with them. "Tyler's taking a breath of air on deck. He'll join us for supper."

"I see," the girl said.

York suggested the poker game, but nobody wanted to play. He took out his case and removed a cheroot and lighted it; he was restless, he couldn't keep his eyes from the saloon ports. Excitement dampened his skin and made it glisten in the sallow lamp flames. He couldn't sit still.

Hewes observed to no one in particular, "Whale of a lot of freight goin' up from Washburn."

"Homestead stuff." York sounded indifferent. He sucked smoke and spouted it out.

"Also from Bismarck, a lot of freight." Hewes shrugged, and lipped his drink. It was as if he didn't care any longer.

"Bismarck's a railhead." York tapped ash nervously.

Hewes shrugged again. He was enjoying this game more than he ever had a game of cards. "Saw an odd-lookin' box —about the size of a Gatling gun. It was marked 'Sheppard plow'."

Tyler Coles came in from the deck, eyes fixed on York. He sat down hastily, blowing on his hands. "Lot of deckers out there."

"How many?" York asked the end of his cheroot.

"Seventy-five — total." Coles smiled quickly. "Funny, the clerk kept telling 'em they'd never get to Peck, and may not reach Berthold." He made a head-motion to Hannibal and York caught it.

York nodded briefly, as if he were musing about something.

Claflin Hewes had seen the likes of that signal before. He told himself, There goes Hannibal Husted.

The supper gong clanged.

An ominous scraping ran down the starboard side of the *Queen* and shook her lamps and bumped once and was gone. "Ice," someone whispered.

Husted sat opposite Yvonne at supper. He hadn't thought of Maryann Trasher all day and he had difficulty remembering her now. If only Yvonne wouldn't pick up her chops in her hands. She saw his wonderment, lowered the chop bone and stuck out her tongue at him.

A yowl sounded from outside and everybody stopped eating.

"Deckers getting drunk—to keep warm," York explained.

Hewes narrowed his eyes. "Dangerous when they're drunk, deckers."

THE STEWARDS were gray-faced and tense; they served soup with unsteady hands. Mr. Niggles made an error in fare computation that evening. Captain Quarles and Mate Tibbetts had an argument over the proper approach to the channel that passed the mouth of Knife River, which they expected to raise next day.

And that's how it gets through a ship: a man implies something—like, There aren't any Bibles aboard this trip, someone forgot 'em. And another man arches his brows and whispers that he understands the ghost of Aaron Burr is aboard. You can tell it by the crew. A ship is a living thing, for its crew. And when the ship is sick or pointed for trouble, they feel it, accept it, carry it. There is nothing else to do. They are helpless; so are the passengers.

At four minutes past eight bells, Tibbetts tilted his wheel sharp to starboard and guided on the man with the lamp. The man was poised at the peak, hanging onto the jackstaff with one hand. The lamp swung back and forth urgently and Tibbetts rang down his engines and the *Queen* vibrated once and shuddered to inertness. Two men snubbed landing lines around the fore bollards and loped them ashore and splashed in and sought the bank and secured. Water slapped angrily at the *Queen's* strakes and she settled for the night. A wood-cutting detail was sent ashore with lamps, axes and guns.

Husted said, "I'm goin' to stretch my legs ashore." Others had, ignoring the captain's warning. Hawley York and Tyler Coles had assisted Yvonne down the plank to the muddy bank.

"I wouldn't," Hewes mumbled over his brandy. He waited for the last steward to leave the saloon. The bartender was ears-deep in a month-old Chicago paper. "Quick card sense may win battles but methodical mediocrity wins wars." Hewes drank. "Don't tip your hand yet."

"I want them to tip theirs."

Hewes glanced down at his half-hunter watch: 8:25. And it entered his head that you never look at your watch to see what time it is, but to find out how much time you have to get to someplace or do something. "We'll be here all night." The major had all the time in the world and he didn't care what happened to him anyway. He thought, Maybe I can straighten this lost sheep out and put him in the right meadow . . . Maybe. "You were Maine Volunteers?"

"Sam Chamberlain's."

Claflin Hewes tried to place where his divisions had contacted the Maine regiments, but he couldn't. He couldn't because the frightsome image of a hideous cabal rose in his mind and chilled his soul. It was a cabal that stood rumorless and real before him, and he realized of a sudden that it had been planned and packaged faultlessly and soon would be brought to fruition. Tomorrow, he guessed.

Horses came to his mind. The trip before him, the *Queen* had carried horses to Berthold in amounts topping any troop needs. So this trip, this last one of the year, the *Queen* would carry men and equipment. And the straightest road to the Killdeer Claim was the Knife River. So tomorrow it must be.

He swilled his brandy, spilling some on his chins. Exhultation made the major feel younger; he was in this thing now, and must play it as dealt. There was no time to get through to the Berthold garrison; it was doubtful if a troop-and-a-half of cavalry could do much anyway against seventy-five deckers plus whatever number waited at the Knife River. Lurking through thirteen thousand square miles of rich mineral land were the men who would wrest that land from the name of its owner and from the United States.

In the river's upper wilds a great brain was working and the sound of its thinking came in the *crang!* of axes felling trees for stockades; it came in the rattle of weapons being issued and the barked commands to patrols being sent out to ride boundaries: Sully's Creek up the Little Missouri to Beaver Creek; Beaver Creek east along the Little Missouri to the Big Muddy itself; Sully's Creek east to the Cannonball; the Heart River from Killdeer Mountain to the Missouri. "I'll watch the Knife River myself, the *Queen* passes there tomorrow with York and Tyler."

Claflin Hewes looked at Hannibal and demanded to know more about Owen Koch.

"He should know his own kind better. He used to be a Maine man." We fought for it, Hannibal. Let's grab our share! Owen Koch, leaving Portland to go west with a wagon train. He had not been joking, had Koch with his fast hands and greedy eyes. "It's him all right, who's stirring this up." For the third time in Hannibal's life animal anger was throbbing through him.

Hannibal's hair fell over his face and he whacked it aside. "I got to get ashore, major!"

"Then I'll go with you."

"No, you won't." Hannibal had his papers out, sticky in their oilskins. "You keep these for me." He couldn't lose those papers, nor could he allow anyone else to get them. They had become, with his awareness of what was happening up-river, much more than thirteen thousand square miles of territory; they represented a manner of living that rightfully belonged to Hannibal Husted and he would not abandon pursuit of it easily. "Tyler Coles an' York took Yvonne ashore. I may peek at the party." He had an afterthought. "Your gun loaded?"

Claflin Hewes was utterly surprised. "Me and my gun have been loaded for forty years!"

HANNIBAL clumped past the bucket brigade formed by the wood-cutters. He paraded its mobile length from the bank to the stand of frozen cottonwoods a quarter-mile inshore. He rounded the cottonwoods with breath pluming and muscles aching and he stopped once, hearing the ringing of axes.

The frozen cottonwoods were empty. He trudged riverward, moving almost quietly despite a gait that had been molded to the rise and fall of plow furrows. He reached the river half-a-mile north of where the *Queen* lay to the bank, be-strung with the dim jewels of her own lights. He crouched, undecided where to go.

Hannibal hugged his knobby knees, half-hearing the wind whisper through the long, stiff grasses. And then those grasses seemed to be speaking hoarsely and guardedly. Voices came from a depression in the bank not ten yards away.

It was Coles now, defending himself. "But we couldn't get the papers! We were gonna take 'em, then bury Brackenfall, when this scarecrow lets go with a sneeze."

Hawley York grated, "Why couldn't you drop him? There were two of you."

"Like I told you . . . he tripped Ben and grabbed his gun an' threw it down on me. I tried for him an' hit Ben."

"You sure it was Husted?"

Hannibal moved forward.

"Positive."

York snuffled a few times, undecided. "It isn't the title so much as the survey report. That'll save Koch and me a year's work."

Yvonne wanted to go back. "I'm cold, and the boat's warm."

"Go back to it!" York was savage. He

watched her walk swiftly and erectly away. "Pride." He flung the word to Coles. "A river baggage like that having pride." He relaxed slightly, incredulous at his own observation. "Think I'll sell her to the next Pawnee I meet. Tie her to his pony's tail." His elbow-nudge was gleeful. "When we're running our own little country and Killdeer City's a fact, we won't want anything like that around, eh?" His wink was a lusty lid-snap.

Yvonne was parading back to them, a one-woman phalanx poised for the attack. "The wind carries a voice, Uncle Hawley. You should have noticed that on the ship." One of her arms was back, held easily.

Hannibal shut his eyes for an instant. Only farmer boys walk alone at night.

Her arm was arcing into York's face. It struck before he could duck, it slashed into his cheek and ripped the hard skin and crisped through his mustache. A saber-strike.

The breath rushed from York's distended lungs and he made claws of his hands and reached for her greedily and came up short against Coles. Coles was jabbing the darkness with a stubby forefinger. "Someone's over by the—"

Hannibal gathered himself and stood up. He sniffled. His hair began to slide down and he reached for it.

"Don't move!" York's gun was on his hip, where it couldn't be grabbed. "A scarecrow, right enough." He stepped closer, tongue-swiping his torn mustache. "You seem to be all over where you're not wanted."

"It's a free country." Hannibal lowered his hand from his hair mop.

York's gun moved. "Step in and search him, Tyler." York sniggered suddenly. "A lot of passengers fall into the river and get drowned. One more won't overflow the banks."

"Don't do that!" Yvonne was biting the words off, spitting them at him. "Don't do it!"

"Don't you tell me what to do, ladybird." The snout of York's gun was a hungry mouth opened at Husted. Coles waded past Yvonne and reached. "Eavesdropping," York was saying, "is an offense against decency as well as—"

Hannibal's arm had the straight strength of a hayrake. It pole-axed Tyler Coles and belted him into York and dropped him onto the back of his head. It followed through into York's midriff and jack-knifed his chin to his knees. Hannibal caught the spinning gun and slung it aside and batted hair from his face and danced back.

"Hands, York, no guns! Get up and come in."

HAWLEY YORK had trouble getting off his knees; he crouched there, a black-clad menace making bubbling noises. Then he sprang. He hurled Coles' sprawled form and catapulted himself at Hannibal and there was the sharp smacking of hands hitting hands. They wind-milled awkwardly, caught together, grunting. They toppled off-balance, boots scrambling. York snapped, "Eavesdropping and breaking cabin locks!"

Yvonne folded her arms and rested her weight on one leg and smiled in the moonlight. She breathed, "I hope he kills you." She breathed it at York.

Then York was doubled down in Hannibal's arm-lock, face wrenched sideways, legs half-crossed and sagging. His words at her were furious. "Use it!"

She shifted weight to the other leg. "Like you'd use me?" She caressed her chin with her fingertips. She felt the knife.

Hannibal gathered calf-muscle, heaved and cart-wheeled York's legs up and his head down and dumped him on top of Coles and danced back again, wiping at his hair. He heard a cry from the wood brigade; the sound of boots came from downstream.

He was beginning to enjoy himself, he hadn't wrestled warm flesh like this since the time the Thrasher's heifer got stuck in the fence. He blew spit. "Come on in, York."

York came in.

A piston-hard punch took Hannibal under the chin and knocked him onto one heel and a cross-punch shook his ribs and doubled him forward and an open palm struck the cartilage rings of his windpipe and almost choked him to death.

He was on all fours, gagging and heaving, hair splayed across his vision.

'Get up, Husted."

He waited, drawing muscle-feel up from

his hands, from his feet, from his spine. He was a cat that had just been pitched into an unfamiliar room, striving for orientation.

He got up with both arms lashing and something metallic descended on him and even as he recognized it for Tyler Coles' gun butt it smashed into his forehead and there was a great shower of white sparks on a black blanket and blood was bubbling through his teeth and all the strength left him . . . .

"Not bad, farmer." Yvonne folded an icy towel over his head and slapped his cheeks a few times, idly.

A steward's dark face was ten miles above him, peering down in awed silence. The rest of it fell into focus—the paneling of the saloon, the milky blobs of lamp light; Claflin Hewes' red-laced eyeballs.

"You all right now?" The major shoved a glass to Hannibal's lips and the stuff seared his mouth and mixed with congealing gum-blood and made him cough. Yvonne helped him to a sitting position.

The bartender backed away, never taking his eyes from the side settee where this man had been placed. The bartender was still holding his old Chicago paper, not conscious of it.

"Try another." The major used the glass again, and Hannibal's head burst into pain.

He needed to vomit.

His hairs were sticky and his hands were sticky and his mouth was sticky. He accepted a third swallow of brandy, and forced himself to his feet. He had to hang onto a table.

"The wood cutting detail," Hewes murmured. "They broke off to watch the scrap, and that brought the captain. It also brought me."

The *Western Queen* was simmering, steam full up; her woodwork creaked in agony as the current leaned into her strakes.

Hannibal wanted to know the time.

"About four," Hewes said. "We shove off pretty soon."

Hannibal was feeling better. A cook was sing-songing from the galley, warbling the rich, off-key ballads of the south. Coffee hung in the musty air and suddenly Hannibal was hungry.

He thought of the Knife River. Today, sometime, they'd pass the mouth of the Knife River. Or anyhow try to pass it.

"Hewes?" Hannibal was feeling himself all over. "Did they find—"

The major handed it to him. His gun. "I found it."

"Thanks. It must have dropped out . . ." His attention wandered to Yvonne. "Use what?" Those words were the last truly coherent words he remembered. York had been pleading with her to use something. Until York had landed on Coles and taken his gun.

"This?" She had the knife out, letting it balance across a palm. "Ladies on river steamers aren't supposed to carry guns." She threw the knife up and caught it by the hilt and put it away. "But there's something about steel that repels most men."

"Like bayonets," Major Hewes gruffed. "Better on the defense than on the offense."

HAWLEY YORK'S shadow became a shape in the corridor leading from the cabins. The shape became the man himself. He propelled his boots past the bar to where Hannibal stood at the table. "I trust, Mr. Husted, that your recent lesson in etiquette will hold for awhile."

Hannibal's impulse was to lift five knuckles up from his right knee and pulverize that mocking, handsome face. But he couldn't; he couldn't because he didn't have the strength. His throat was a sore lump, his head ached furiously and his jaw felt loose. As if the hinges had been cracked.

Claflin Hewes was lofty with contempt. "Speaking of etiquette, Mr. York, I don't seem to recall that searching a helpless man's pockets would constitute—"

"It was my knife." Hawley York extended a hand to Yvonne. "I thought he might have stolen my knife. Someone else must have it." His fingers popped. "Please." With a grin at Hannibal he added: "My dear."

"My knife." Her words were a threatful sibilance. "Occasionally—I lend it to people."

There they stood, blackmailing each other with hard eyes.

York rattled four fingers across the ball of his thumb. "I'll 'borrow' it now—as you so quaintly put it . . . Please!"

She stood behind the table next to Han-

nibal, shoulders arched in tension. "Ben borrowed it once—and he's dead." She pulled back her hand, never taking those eyes from his ripped face.

He used his tongue, exploring his lips. He got a silk handkerchief and applied it to his face, gently.

Then the thin curtain of his restraint dissolved over his reason and blinded it and sent one hand to her throat. "You dock slut!" He dragged her across the table and wrenched her against the wall and held her to the paneling. "You river witch!"

His free hand dove at her elkskin blouse and shredded the rawhide lacing and groped between her breasts for the hilted blade.

The *Queen's* whistle exploded in a brass burst and he looked up at the ceiling and she slashed his throat and jaws with back-and-forth swipes of her nails and drove a skirted knee into his abdomen and lowered a forearm across his bare bent neck, and sent him to the deck.

She stepped over him and brushed her palms daintily and began re-arranging the torn lacing of her blouse. "You."

The mesmerized steward became a living thing.

"Coffee!" She tucked a lace into her teeth and held it while she worked at eyelets.

Claflin Hewes collapsed onto his butt and the whole side settee squealed under his sudden weight. "Well I'll be God-double-damned!" His fingers flowed in a quick arc. "Brandy all around!"

Hannibal Husted's tallow legs folded and he was on a hard chair with elbows to knees and head hanging weakly. He hardly saw York pull himself up and shuffle back into the corridor; he hardly tasted the brandy that the steward placed to his cut mouth.

All he could see was Yvonne Calkins, as she chose to call herself, and that's all he wanted to see. There was no past, no East, no Maine, no tasseled furniture in a farm living room with tea on the hob. No nothing except this she-cat nibbling at rawhide lacing and flashing her eyes as she re-dressed herself.

A hail sounded from forward and the *Queen* came to life in a thumping of pistons and throbbing of woodwork and slamming of paddles. She backed off from the bank and waddled into the current and thrashed forward and was under weigh for the Knife River passage and—maybe—the Fort Berthold landing.

CLAFLIN HEWES had been dozing on the side settee, but he came awake to the scuffle of boots from outside and to the monotonous *snat! snat! snat!* of well-aimed pistol fire.

He swung his legs to the quivering deck and lunged for his inside pocket and felt nothing but his wallet. Then the air left his lungs in an exhale of relief. He had given the oilskin parcel of papers to Hannibal after York had trudged back to his cabin.

The major blinked and yawned. Deckers were pressing against the doors of the saloons, awaiting the gong for second-sitting breakfast. The bar was closed and the major was alone in the saloon except for weary stewards.

Snat! Snat! Snat!

Some of the deckers laughed hoarsely; there was the *ching!* of a cylinder being snapped from a frame.

Hewes made his way out on deck and found Hannibal Husted practicing pistol shots at the shore.

Hannibal thumbed plump cartridges into the Peacemaker and flipped the cylinder back into the frame and took a steady stance.

The major wagged a finger. "This isn't the range, son." He stepped to the rail. "This isn't an exhibition rehearsal by the First City Troop, about to be inspected by a governor who'll"—Hewes belched smartly—"be too drunk to observe the fire anyway."

The western shore flowed south past the *Queen's* steady northward thrust; the wind-ruffled surface of the current was cold and brown and oily and fast. Hewes sniffed snow. He sneezed. "Give me that hand piece . . . Never point a gun unless you intend to hit something. West of the Hudson River, that usually means a man. No man will ever allow you to stand and aim at him, graceful as a statue though you may be." Hewes tucked the '73 into his side-belt. "That shore is a threat to me. I"—his fist moved sidewards, imperceptibly—"throw down on"—the gun appeared and fired—"it!"

Captain Quarles, at the wheel as they approached the Knife River channel, smelled snow.

He didn't like it and he told Mr. Tibbetts he didn't like it and he asked him to have a look around the ship. "Understand, Mr. Mate . . ." The captain concentrated on the Wounded Dog Bend, that sucking gray thumb of mire that extends from the east bank into mid-channel, just below the Knife.

"Yes, Captain?" Mr. Tibbetts didn't like many things about this trip, but he hadn't wanted to say so. He didn't like an overload of deckers and he didn't like cargo that was stenciled for what it obviously was not and he didn't like the man York. He'd seen the man York before somewhere, with a gent called Koch.

"I'm a friendly, God-fearin', deep-drinkin' man myself, and I like to be friendly at all times with the passengers." The captain made the Wounded Dog nicely and leveled the wheel. "But that eastern lad—the Hannibal person—he's been tryin' to find his way below to the cargo holds, so Niggles tells me. Earlier, he was aimin' pistol fire at the banks with the major. Now he wants to frisk cargo . . . See to it, Mr. Mate. All nice and polite like, of course."

"Of course, Captain." Come to think of it, how could Miss Calkins be signed on as Mrs. York? The mate gnawed at that one for fully a minute.

"And Tibbetts?" Captain Quarles hunched to the wide spokes. "Check the weapons locker, just to see if all the rifles are there."

"I a'ready done that, Captain." The mate put on his hat and buttoned his mackinaw. It was colder now than it had been an hour ago. "I'll check the cargo holds."

He made his way down from the Texas deck to the main deck and from the main deck to the upper grating of the engine room. It was warm there, the beat of the pistons and breath of the boilers made it habitable. He descended the ladder to the starting platform where bulky Mr. Burleigh, the first engineer, was at the throttle. The channel approaches to the Knife were dangerous and the first engineer liked to be on watch himself at such times.

They nodded briefly to each other. Mr. Burleigh was in that semi-somnambulant state of mind arrived at by all good watch-keepers after years of service. They are relaxed yet alert, introspective yet aware. They may be day-dreaming about home, but at the barest hint of a raw cross-head shoe or a hot bearing, they snap to attention.

"Got the key to the for'ard holds?" Mr. Tibbetts held out a palm. He didn't like the engine room, despite its warmth. It was full of stinking machinery and lunging pistons and clatter of wood lengths being fed to the fires. It would be, reflected Mr. Tibbetts, one hell of a place to get caught if the *Queen* ever went down.

Mr. Burleigh hesitated, fully alert now. "You were forward before?"

"No, not today." The mate's hand wobbled uncertainly.

"Funny." The first engineer groped for the key. "Sounded like someone was in there. He must have come down a ventilator." He found the key. "Or maybe through the access hatch to the pantry." He presented the key. "Better go have a look."

"I am."

The mate pushed himself along the throbbing bed-plates and circumvented the hell-hot boilers widely and came to the slidebar locking off No. 2 hold from the engine room. He let himself in and put the door on a hook to take advantage of the light from the engine room lamps.

A queer iciness froze his spine, unaccountable in that relative heat. He knew fear. His tongue was harsh in his dry mouth and his teeth felt big. He stepped inside and forced himself to stoop to each stacked crate. He thought the *Queen* was wriggling too much, and he unbent from his stoop and listened. . . .

3

When Land Pirates Advance

YVONNE CALKINS laced her tea with whiskey and sipped it. It had been the major's suggestion—she was beginning

to like the major—and she had accepted it.

There were only the three of them in the main saloon. Hannibal was sitting with head tipped and jaws open, listening.

He was hearing voices again. They came from the woodwork, from the beams. Human voices, well-muffled. He wondered what Aaron Burr must have sounded like.

Yvonne raised her cup. "Cheers, my farmer."

Hewes glanced all around the saloon. The bartender was finishing his old Chicago back-issue—finishing it with obvious reluctance, as there was nothing else aboard to read; a steward was vanishing aft. Hewes wondered where Hawley York and Coles were.

Then Hewes, too, heard the voices. "Sometimes," he told them, "when the deck vents are turned into the wind, speech from up there is tossed right through the ship."

Nasal and indistinct came several foul words. Coles' words. Then— "I'll get below now."

A cough, and York spoke. "Don't worry about her." He seemed to be speaking from miles away.

Hannibal's mouth dried out. He hardly heard boots bumping down the access ladder from the Texas deck. The vents opened onto the Texas.

Yvonne rose, face brittle. "Privacy, on the river, is a luxury."

And then there were only the two of them. Hannibal felt the *Queen* wriggle slightly, as if she were trying to shake off water.

Hewes spoke to his hands, so the steward couldn't hear. "What'd you find below?"

"Just what you told me I'd find. I went down through the pantry hatch." Hannibal watched the steward leave. "I found a hand axe the cook or someone uses to break out supplies." He whispered, "There's no machinery, no farm equipment. I'd know farm equipment, wouldn't I?"

"Go on."

The steward returned with two others and stood in the far corner, wide-eyed. They flapped napkins idly; they didn't speak. The stewards were supposed to be below during the middle watches, not topside.

Hannibal said, "A Gatling, for one thing. Army issue, not for civilian use."

"Tell me more," Hewes said.

The first steward left, and one by one the others peeled after him.

"Ammunition— 'bout thirty-forty thousand rounds. Rifles in cosmoline. And airtights. Enough airtights to feed a—a—small nation. For all winter."

Four bells chimed through the *Queen*, and the major took out his watch.

"Two o'clock." Ice thudded along the ship's strakes. "We'll pass the Knife soon."

They stared at each other, helpless.

CAPTAIN Quarles wished that the mate would come up from the holds and help him with the wheel. It takes more than one man to work a ship past the mouth of the Knife; the channel is deep and ragged there, cut by the river's rushing confluence into half a dozen treacherous trenches. If you could get past the Knife, you could float all the way to China.

Quarles was thinking that when he heard, "Don't take your hands off the wheel, Captain. Don't move your feet."

Below on the engine-room grating Mr. Burleigh checked his boiler gauges. It seemed that one was delivering more steam than the other, so that the ship was dragging her stern sidewards a bit. He looked from his gauges to the door of No. 2 hold, framing the silhouette of Mr. Tibbetts.

The mate stepped into the engine room and passed the simmering boilers.

"Someone's been cutting into the cargo." Tibbetts craned his head all around him. "It's not as marked, the manifest's wrong."

Mr. Burleigh slammed the throttle full open to give Quarles all the steam he needed to get past the Knife channels.

Both he and the mate elevated their strained faces to the ladder as boots crept down it. A gun was on them. "Close that throttle. You won't need steam any more . . ."

In the ship's office, Mr. Niggles was sucking his under lip and trying to compute how farm equipment as manifested could be so much overweight. The *Queen* was floating heavy, she was using more wood than the listed cargo would demand, and the first engineer had logged it so and

reported the logging to the clerk. So Mr. Niggles had about decided to go below and see for himself. Here it was quarter past two and he hadn't tasted lunch yet.

He gathered the papers and folded them and stuck the quill into buckshot and left his desk and opened the office door. A huge decker stepped over the transom and closed the door and placed the double mouths of a sawed-off scatter gun against Mr. Niggles' stomach. "Sit down and keep your mouth shut. I got a nervous finger. . . ."

The bartender gazed forlornly at his newspaper.

The bartender thought he heard the river growl. He looked outside and saw the deckers moving with unaccountable swiftness past the saloon. They were coming into it, pressing together against the doors. The bartender waved his hands back and forth. "Cabin passengers only!"

The Army officer rose fast and turned about.

The *Queen* sank into a sickening lurch; her rudder cables rattled loosely and someone cried out. The throbbing beat of engines sloughed off, slacked and died and the *Queen* sagged back to even keel on her new course. It was, the bartender saw, cross-current, toward the hard brown bank above the mouth of the Knife. He also saw a length of pipe revolving his way. It knocked him into a bottomless black well.

HANNIBAL HUSTED yanked Major Hewes away from the advancing deckers and shoved him sharp about and propelled him around the tables and into the corridor leading to the pantry. Hannibal saw the three stewards darting aft to safety; he had his gun out.

"Major, can you squeeze down a hatch?"

Captain Quarles heard his steam go down just after the voice behind him commanded him not to move his feet. The *Queen* was dying.

York said, "Hold her nose to the bank, just above the Knife."

Hawley York heard two shots from the saloon below. He wondered which one had been killed—Husted or the major.

Ahead on the cold shore, small and dark in the distance, a rider popped into view and waved. Hawley York smiled. "To the right a bit."

The *Queen* scraped across a deep bar. Ice growled into her, and she shuddered.

Tyler Coles backed Mr. Burleigh, the mate, and two wood-passers against the nearest boiler casing. He felt the shudder of the ship; the bed plates rattled and soot filmed from the boilers and descended on the four men like a veil. Then Tibbetts whirled and grabbed a sluice-bar and brought it around like a javelin.

Coles never flinched as he blew a single shot through the mate's chest.

Then Coles moved his gun toward the open hooked door leading to No. 2 hold. He thought he'd seen two shadows.

The *Queen* grated aground with the sound of sandpaper on stone and her decks rose drunkenly and her stern dropped. The paddles caught, went stiff; broke.

"Well done, Quarles." Hawley York was leaning against the angle of the deck. He flipped his gun out butt-first and cracked it into the short hairs behind the captain's ear and let him fall.

The *Queen*, he knew, would lay here for perhaps six hours, perhaps twelve. Time enough to get unloaded, anyway.

York listened to the clatter of unloading. He saw the initial shore party reach the bank and secure lines for tackling off the cargo.

A huge decker appeared, carrying Mr. Niggles over one shoulder.

York shouted, "Tie him up and fall into the shore party!" York wondered where Yvonne was.

He flung up an arm to the circling rider on the bank. Other horsemen were weaving down from the ridges. "Hullo there, Owen!"

Owen Koch grinned all over. Pretty good, delivering a ship, cargo and crew.

"Hullo, Hawley! We're all set for you! Horses and pack train ready to ride!"

From below came the ear-chilling stutter of the Gatling gun.

York threw himself down the ladder to the main saloon.

"Where the hell's Husted and Hewes?" He held his gun on his hip.

Nobody seemed to know. "They trailed out that way. They plugged him."

The decker that Hannibal had shot was on the floor under a table, clay-faced and quiet.

"Didn't anybody follow 'em?"

"Follow 'em to where? They disap-

peared." The deckers were crowding behind the bar, smashing bottle necks and slurping up the stuff. . . .

Hawley York got tough. He tongue-lashed them onto the deck and put them on the shore detail. He detailed them below to No's 1 and 2 holds to help haul cargo topside to the tackles. He let them keep what liquor they had stolen.

He fanned an arm back and forth to Owen Koch. "I'll be last ashore! Have those horses ready!"

The *Queen* vibrated fitfully as her wide bottom went lower in the mud. . . .

Hawley York jogged aft the way Hannibal and Hewes had disappeared. He found the open pantry hatch and stuck his head into the shaft. The stutter of the Gatling deafened him.

Hannibal Husted stepped over Tyler Coles' shredded body and knelt to Mr. Tibbetts and probed for heart and pulse. He rose and shrugged. "Nothin' at all."

Mr. Burleigh seized an Adams pistol from the locker under the throttle and started up the ladder, the two wood-passers after him.

"Hold that!" Major Hewes had a hand up. He danced clumsily a moment as the *Queen* settled deeper into the mud.

Hewes was a tactician. "Don't divide in the face of 'em. Stay with us." His face was wide in a gleeful grin. "Hannibal, can you tote that Gatling all right?"

"I can."

A steward dropped down the ladder and struck the bed plates and rolled his eyes with animal fear. "Dey won't let us out!"

The whacking *thock!* of axes came like canister shot from the forward holds and light fled downward as the hatch covers were ripped from the deck and men lowered themselves onto the stacked cargo.

Mr. Burleigh and his wood-passers dropped off the ladder and waited.

"Nobody move!" Hawley York stood in the hooked-back door to No. 2 hold, thumb to hammer. "Hewes! Walk backward toward me! Don't turn around!"

The major stiffened in his boots.

Small feet ticked down the ladder rungs. Yvonne Calkins swung a heavy hand gun.

The explosion of her gun and the leaping smoke and the *clang!* of the bullet on the metal door hook all came at once. The door moved away from the bulkhead and swung shut and stayed there, released by the angle of the ship.

She dropped to the bed-plating and faced Hewes. "Major, you've got a recruit. No" —her description of her opinion of Hawley York was vivid— "can blackmail me for a knife."

A cry sounded from topside. "Cargo's a-wa-a-a-y!"

Someone yelled in half-drunken triumph.

Yvonne weighed the gun in both hands. "Sorry I missed him, Major."

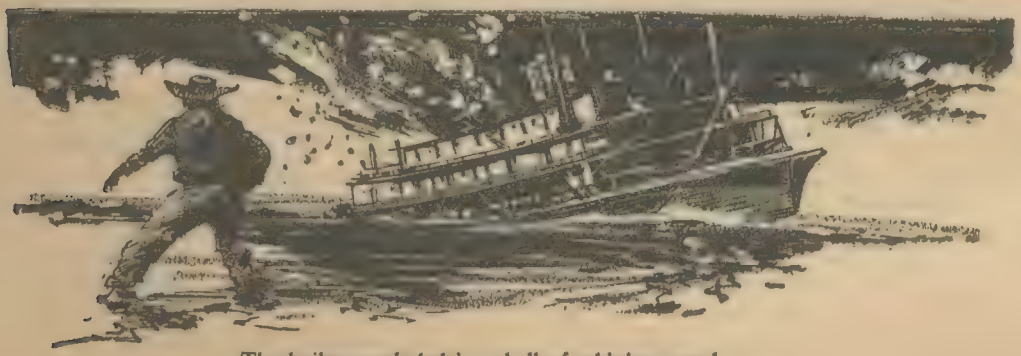
"We may get him later, m'dear. You!" To a wood-passer. "Help Husted here with that gun! Come on up with me." He placed a soaked boot on the ladder.

Hannibal gladly shared the dragging weight in his arms.

He staggered toward the ladder, tripped over the submerged bodies of Coles and the mate; regained balance and started up.

They reached the pantry alley and turned into it. Claflin Hewes led the way, placing one squshy boot ahead of the other cautiously. He stopped six feet from the main saloon.

Hannibal and the wood-passer were behind him; the first engineer, the steward,



The boilers exploded in a hell of whining metal. . . .

the other wood-passer and Yvonne stayed in single file in the alley.

Hawley York raced past on deck, stopped suddenly and turned back to the saloon. He saw Hewes' shadow in the alley and fired.

Hewes fired back and missed and York fired again and tagged the major through the shoulder-meat. Hewes winced and half-doubled and came erect.

Then Hannibal Husted had the Gatling to the alley entrance; he grabbed the crank and chugged off three slow shots and broke glass. Hawley York spun about and jumped over the saloon transom and raced forward.

Hewes made a face, one fist to his hit shoulder. "After 'em—we can dust 'em off where they stand. Steward—get below and dig out more ammunition for this Gatling. You—girl—see if you can find rations. The steward'll help you pass 'em up to the saloon."

He led them across the saloon and past the shattered bar and onto the deck.

A DERISIVE hail rose from shore. Hawley York dropped free of the tackle and a man sprang across the sludgy sand and used an axe and hacked the falls to pieces. The hail rose again as the tackle sagged into the river, was caught in the current and pulled downstream.

Hewes continued his estimate of the situation: he commanded six people that he knew of, maybe a few more. He and his command were marooned on the high-angled forepeak of the half-sunken *Queen*, with no way to get down to the sand and ashore except to jump and wade. The distance was about sixty feet. And at the other end of that sixty feet of space were almost a hundred men who were catching-up pack horses and breaking open cargo casings and distributing the load among the animals. A fast spatter of shots tacked into the *Queen*.

Hewes ducked and dropped to his knees and circled an arm backward. "Get to the wheelhouse and see if Quarles is all right." He snapped fingers at Hannibal. "But keep low! Run and fall—run and fall!"

Hannibal lowered his end of the Gatling and hurled himself down the deck past the saloon. He wheeled inside and got to the shelter ladder and ran up it to the Texas.

He reached Quarles, rolled him over and batted his face and wrists and jounced him up and down. A bullet took the glass from a window.

"Easy," Hannibal told Quarles. "Stay down. Don't move yet."

Another bullet tore framing from the smashed window and dented the binnacle and snarled into the flag locker.

Captain Quarles rubbed the back of his head tenderly. Then in one motion he got up and staggered for balance against the tilted deck and came against the wheel. He took hold of two spokes and stood that way a moment, his empty eyes reflecting utter abandonment. "What'd they do?"

"Took your ship." Hannibal shoved hair back from his angry eyes. "They're ashore now, about to pack inland." He focused on the plunging horses and scurrying men. "My land, by God!" He hooked fingers through Quarles' arm. "Come on, Captain. That wheel won't turn."

They let themselves into the main saloon by way of the shelter ladder and found Mr. Niggles' tightly-bound person by the transom. They cut him loose and stood him up and handed him a brandy.

Quarles' mouth was a vise. His fists were white-knuckled. A bullet from shore pounced into the doorjamb of the saloon and he never moved. "Mr. Niggles."

The clerk coughed hackingly. "A scatter gun, 'twas, an'—"

"Mr. Niggles, break out those snow-shoes you were going to sell at Berthold. Grab some airtights and point up-river."

"For Berthold?" The clerk figured the distance at twenty-five bird miles.

Quarles flinched slightly as the Gatling chugged into life. "Yes, dammit!" The captain got down on hands and knees behind Hannibal; they snaked down the up-canted deck and crept to the Gatling. The wood-passer was cranking handily and the unaimed shots were leaping ashore and scattering horses and men along the banks.

Mr. Burleigh was speaking hurriedly to Claflin Hewes; the first engineer was worried about his boilers . . . "And when that cold water hits the firebeds. . . ."

The *crick-crack* of carbines spattered from shore and the bank went frosty with smoke. Bullets pecked into the *Queen* and a stay parted and glass broke somewhere.

Hewes shook his head. "We can't get ashore 'til they leave. Right now, Burleigh, we've got a fort."

"We won't have it if those boilers blow!"

The thin whine of the *Queen's* whistle sliced the chill afternoon air.

Burleigh spat from the side of his mouth. "Still steam left, some."

Hannibal crawled to the Gatling and thrust the wood-passer aside. "Sam Chamberlain taught me how to wind this thing up." He re-loaded the last of the ammunition from the breech casing and swung his cylinders back and forth and depressed and tripped the crank. The gun hammered and shook.

Yvonne Calkins panted from the saloon with the steward at her heels and spilled Gatling rounds under the gun. "This steward's name is Matthew and he broke open the weapons locker." She snapped a wink at Hewes. "So we've got guns."

The major massaged his shoulder wound a moment. "All right . . . they seem to be pullin' foot now."

The riders ashore, with the Gatling's help, were plunging up the bank, goading the pack animals and swinging whips. Husted re-loaded and elevated and placed a hand to the crank. And froze all over. He froze at sight of the grimacing visage of Owen Koch.

Koch was riding with Hawley York, bringing up the rear. And then both wheeled and trotted over the rise of the bank and vanished west along the reaches of the Knife River.

A muffled grunt vibrated from below.

Mr. Burleigh rose to unsteady feet. Captain Quarles said slowly, "This'll do what they couldn't," he laughed.

Niggles appeared, clutching snowshoes. "The boilers!" He bawled.

Quarles quieted. "Mr. Niggles, at this moment you're the most important person here. Lower yourself overside and track out for Berthold. Tell 'em Major Hewes has a party pushing west up the Knife, and to jackass down and meet us if they can. That right, Major?" Quarles still had his big fists doubled.

"That's it." Hewes swung a thumb. "Track, Niggles!"

Mr. Niggles clambered overside and seized a fall and sank from sight.

The grunt rose through the ventilators again, and the dead *Queen* seemed to quiver.

"Maybe the young lady . . ." Hewes was suggesting. Mr. Niggles appeared below and waded to the bank and faced north.

The boilers blew.

They exploded in a hell of whining metal, crashing pipes and ruptured plating. They spewed searing steam and black smoke through the cracked decking and up the ventilators.

The *Queen's* shattered corpse trembled lower in the mud; her bows rose a bit. One by one her people picked themselves up. There was the acrid stench of burning iron. Smoke dipped away down the trough of the river. Mr. Niggles looked back at it once, and they waved him on.

Quarles pulled himself together, trying not to sob through tight teeth. "Shall we let her alone now? There's nothing we can do." He stepped to the rail. "Here's a cut fall. We can let ourselves ashore on it."

Hewes and Quarles, Hannibal Husted and Yvonne; Mr. Burleigh and two wood passers and three stewards.

The major issued weapons in silence. "When you hit the bank, walk—don't run—after those stray horses. Catch 'em up and hold 'em." He pointed. "Those two dead—roll 'em into the river. They'll land in Bismarck before the freeze. You over first, m'dear."

4

Land Only for the Brave

SNOW came with the darkness. It swirled gently down.

"Hell on harness," Hewes growled. He rode in the lead, casting for a bivouac.

Hannibal was behind him and the others followed at twenty pace intervals. The steward Matthew brought up the rear.

"Major, do you think Niggles can get to Berthold?"

Hewes reined down to a slower walk, not wanting his thoughts to be heard by everyone. "A great big maybe. Alone—he might. He looks wiry. But if York or this Koch circle a party back to anticipate that and cut him off. . . ."

The thickening snow criss-crossed past their wind-stung eyes and hissed to the

dented ground and began to compost itself in shallow drifts. Claflin Hewes came to a bleak, naked stand of cottonwoods and called a halt. He turned over in his mind who he would post on watches. He turned to Hannibal.

"Nervous?"

"No, Major." Hannibal jumped to the ground. "Just mad."

"A commendable emotion when properly controlled." The major swung down. "You take first watch, please. If anything comes out of the night without identifying himself, fire. . . ."

It was all movement for the next five days. It was the steady thrust of horses up the slate-stiff course of the freezing Knife.

Hewes led, as usual. He hadn't spoken all morning of this fifth day. He worked his hurt shoulder back and forth.

Yvonne's tone was taut. "When'll they poke at us, Major?"

"Anytime." Hewes assumed an airiness that was not in him. "We can hold, with that Gatling."

"Until the Berthold garrison comes down?" Yvonne was reproachful.

"Don't plan on that." Hewes sneezed mightily, and used his sleeve. "They may let us walk right up to Killdeer, or they may block us off. Hannibal?"

"I'm here."

"You better bury those papers, in case"

Hannibal's blue jaws shook. "They're mine."

"—in case they lie exposed on your dead body, my boy."

"They're mine."

Hewes released a stored-up breath. "If you had four legs, I'd call you a mule. . . . Take the point until noon and send Matthew back here."

YVONNE rode next to the major for a mile. She had something to tell him.

"There's something familiar about this country."

"You've been on it?"

"No." She cast her eyes this way and that. "But I've been told about it." She dragged old words from the cellars of her mind. "Let's see . . . we've been marching for five days, so tomorrow or next day we should reach the deltas of the Knife." She was reciting awkwardly. "The deltas spoke down to the north fork of the Heart River, and just beyond that is Killdeer Mountain . . . I think."

"Where'd you learn that topography, girl?"

"From . . . my father. Mon pere. Le Diable."

"What's that?" Hewes nodded to Matthew and the dark man shook his head. "No sign yet. Covered up. . . . Le who, did you say?"

"The devil, in French. My father. A wonderful devil." She brightened. "His name was Carrieux, which was my name until I had to change it." Hewes neither remarked nor questioned. She said, "He was in everything, on the upper river. Mostly trouble. Ha!" The muffled crack of fingers slipped from her gauntlet. "Trouble! He wore it well."

Hewes knocked heels to flank. "He owned this, you say?"

"I think so. For a time." She shrugged. "He made enemies—lots of them. The CB, he called this land. I'm sure it was this land."

"CB?" Hewes' attention was becoming divided between Yvonne and Hannibal. Hannibal was dismounted now, squatting in the snow with head bent.

"Chaudiere Blanc—the white boiler. When he first saw this river, this Knife, it was spring-time and boiling down to that old Missouri." She, too, was watching Hannibal.

"He's alive?" Hewes went to the trot.

She kept pace with him, elbows flopping loosely. "He was killed when he was returning to Canada. By someone he had mentioned as Coke." She was hanging on to the clumsily-pumping horse. "There was nothing on my father's body when it was pulled from the river. No papers, no gun, nothing."

Hannibal flung out an arm westward. "Take your pick—it doesn't seem to make much difference."

A dozen trails troughed fan-fashion out into the silent snow. Blackened lumps showed north and south, and farther out there was a long, uneven row of animal droppings.

"Their last camp." Claflin Hewes squinted ahead for several minutes. The land rose gently to the near horizon, which was a confusion of light gray snow melding

into dark blue skies. "Southwest," he grunted. "Straight for Killdeer."

"Not all of them." Hannibal pointed again. "That one goes almost northwest."

"To cut off my cavalry when it comes." And the major cracked his palms together and grimaced with glee. "That means Niggles got through—or they assume one of us did."

Quarles and Mr. Burleigh were blowing and gasping; the wood-passers' faces were scrunched with saddle-agony but Matthew and his two stewards were enjoying it.

It crossed Hannibal's mind: Put a dark man to a horse and you've put a raccoon to a tree.

Hannibal mounted and circled on the forehand and fell back on the tiny cavalcade and tested the lashings of the Gatling. It was forking the haunches of a wood-passer's horse. The man winced. "I never thought in Bismarck I'd come to this."

"You'll be back in Bismarck yet. Just hang onto that corkscrew gun."

Hewes announced his decision. "We'll push straight for Killdeer. They have time, we haven't." He fanned a hand. "Spread out as they are, we may be able to bore our way through."

TENSION sprang through all of them like the throb of a cut artery. It brought them straight in their saddles, it put their hands to gunstocks.

Hewes yanked his neck around and told them, "I don't know what's going to happen ahead—but my thanks to you for this." The major was not handy with speeches and he had to sneeze again. Then he used his heels. "Let's go."

There was an evening chill in Hannibal's slugging heart as he trailed Hewes and led the others toward the snow-swept grayness of those lonely hills. It seemed as if they were full of eyes.

He considered asking Hewes to poke around for a bivouac; he inhaled to call out, and that's when Quarles, on point, stopped.

Mr. Burleigh, the first engineer, pressed forward with Adams pistol out.

The thin crack of a shot slatted away on its echoes. Quarles rose from his mat saddle and arced backwards and hung there.

Quarles tumbled slowly past his horse's haunch and sagged gently into the drifts.

"The Gatling." Hewes was calm. "Place it here by this hillock. The rest of you—"

Three more shots rapped from the hill and three bullets ripped the snow and three thin plumes of smoke drifted away. A fourth shot thumped into Quarles' horse.

"Form a circle around it and keep low. Husted may have to depress to short range." Quarles' horse was on its knees, its chest. Presently it rolled to its side ribs.

"Major, I recommend we drag this corkscrew gun up to that beast and use him for a redoubt."

Hewes paused, licked his lips, and nodded. "In time, m'boy."

They placed Quarles' cap over his stony features as an act of decency. Mr. Burleigh knelt and touched one of the dead man's hands.

A horseman thrashed through the snow from the hip of that hill and plunged wide past them. Another followed him, and another; and a third and a fourth. Shots pecked irritably from the circle and one of them smacked into the Gatling's tripod and rang like a bell.

"Half-past twelve and steam's up!" Mr. Burleigh's Adams jumped and bucked and fluffed smoke. A horse went down, hoofs spinning, and its rider leapt clear.

The steward Matthew aimed at leisure and took a breath and fired and knocked the rider from sight.

THE HILL vomited more horsemen; it spewed them from each side, as toys are sprung from a box. They were bearing down on each side, north and south.

A wood-passer doubled from the hips and sat down suddenly, clutching his belly.

A hand tapped Hannibal's boot. It was a canvas-gauntleted hand. Yvonne was there, very close to him.

He crouched, seized the crank, and revolved it. The Gatling jerked and barked and chugged out four heavy bullets.

"Under, m'boy." Hewes stood spread-legged, his pistol in his hand. He wished he'd worn his uniform.

Hannibal elevated, re-loaded and cranked. The bullets carried cleanly and swept the length of the south thrust and scythed five men down and tagged two horses and sent another twitching over the ice in fright.

A yowl of dismay filtered across the snow.

The hit wood-passer toppled over on his

Hewes stood spread-legged, his pistol in his hand. . . .

side and exhaled the last air his lungs would ever hold.

Hannibal shouldered the Gatling around and aimed high. The other wood-passer helped him re-load. Then he garden-hosed the north thrust and when the gun was empty and he could see snow through the black tubes of its shining cylinders, he could also see four piles of horseflesh. He heard Hewes speak: "Muskets! On target . . ."

One downed rider was limping and three hadn't been hit at all. The muskets from the *Queen's* weapons locker fired all at once but unevenly.

The south thrust was melting back to the hill in tatters; the north thrust buckled, came together, milled and stayed bunched. After a moment it, too, straggled back west to the hill.

Hannibal re-loaded.

Mr. Burleigh leaned over and crossed the wood-passer's hands and pulled the man's scarf over his shocked face. "A good lad, that one. Fed No. 2 boiler for years." The first engineer's eyes were bright. He uncocked the Adams and re-folded his arms.

Hewes spoke without taking his attention from the hill. "Miss Calkins, I suggest you

save one shot, as we had our women do in the Indian days."

"I'd planned to, Major." Her voice was small in the sudden silence.

Hannibal Husted wanted to know what next. He wondered if they'd have to throw snowballs when they ran out of ammunition.

The major sneezed. "I know what I'd do, if I were York or Koch." He shot spit and added, "Or Coke."

Yvonne bounded from her knees. "Or who?"

". . . . How else'd a French-Canadian pronounce it if he'd never seen it, only heard it?" Hewes tapped air with a forefinger. "If I were on that hill yonder with eighty-ninety men, I'd rush this position and take it and eliminate the Gatling. I'd lose maybe a quarter of my strength—but I'd be safe for awhile. For all winter, maybe."

Yvonne's tallow legs folded and she sank into the snow. She seemed to shrink, to grow smaller.

Hannibal thought she might cry; and for the fourth time that curtain was drawn aside for him and he liked what he saw. Loved it, though he wouldn't admit that.

Hewes explored the shaggy ambush of his beard with a curled thumb. He had thought of all the things that click through a man's mind when he is on the defence, but he'd had to dismiss each of them. Rifle-pits, for one. But you can't dig rifle-pits in frozen ground. Ammunition: all issued. Whiskey: none.

He said, simply, "I guess one of those beggars learned his tactics the way I did."

They were coming out of the hill again, dusky in the gathering twilight. They were taking expert advantage of the time of day, and they used visibility the best way possible—by riding at irregular intervals, wide intervals, not forming a compact mass.

They bobbed insolently down the exposed forward slope of that hill and they fell apart south and north and descended on the Gatling position and prepared to surround it, close on it, rush it and devour it.

THERE was the insistent crushing of snow under jogging hoofs and the clinkle of harness and the rasping whisper of orders being passed. A distant bolt snicked back, and a man laughed roughly.

"That'll be York, more or less drunk," Yvonne translated. She was standing next to Hannibal, between him and Hewes.

"Get down."

"I will not."

Hannibal vised her shoulder and shoved. "Get down!"

No woman had ever bitten him before. Horses had, and dogs and cats and squirrels; thorns and splinters and shrapnel. But not a woman. Her teeth closed on the side-meat of his hand and pinched hard.

He twisted it away. "Get down! This is my land, I give the orders."

"It's my land, scarecrow!"

Major Hewes side-stepped across the distance. "If you two don't mind paying attention to the guests? There's going to be a party."

The guests were two hundred yards away, tightening into a three-sided square.

In the pale gray afterlight of dying day, Hannibal Husted winked at Yvonne Carrieux.

She winked back. And she got down.

Hewes braced his gun cross-arm and shut one eye. "At will . . . and take your time." He didn't care if it came now or later, he'd done all he could for one lifetime at least; and besides, he was beginning to feel like a trespasser. This was their land, Yvonne's and Hannibal's, and they could argue it out later—if they lived.

The twilight came apart in a snapping circle of flame-stabs. They flashed orange and yellow and went out.

The crash of the volley smothered the strike of the bullets and there were only two stewards making mouth motions and Mr. Burleigh grabbing his wrist and showing his teeth. The crash rolled away and the first engineer was sobbing curses and trying to pick up his gun and the stewards were grunting in the snow and Claflin Hewes's beard was wriggling as he tried to keep his teeth together so he wouldn't scream. A bullet through the lungs is only numbing, on initial impact; but then it spreads its pain through the chest and into the blood stream.

Hannibal saw Quarles' fallen horse shake to the bite of low shots and he saw Quarles' rigid body jounce once to a strike.

Then he was cranking with all his strength, cranking slowly so he wouldn't jam the cylinders. He edged the Gatling left and right to build a cone of fire.

He saw three of his own horses buck from the picket and scramble free and race into the evening. He saw the circle of guests unravel, fray and drop apart and ride wide.

He saw Claflin Hewes droop; blood sopped from his mouth and lay on his beard like a red napkin. Hewes half-bent, quivering. His gun was loud in Hannibal's ears.

The wood-passer re-loaded for him. Hannibal knew a great calmness of mind and muscle. "See to the wounded. Help the major." Had he bothered to analyze it, he would have realised that it is the inertia that settles into anyone after the nervousness that comes before a battle. And when battle is joined, the nervousness fades and leaves you light.

He grasped the crank, depressed one degree and searched for moving targets.

Yvonne's gun blatted twice and was still. A far rider who had been crawling away from his hit horse flopped to his face in the troubled snow.

THEY came in again, riding low at a heavy gallop. They came in from all four sides, crisp smoke spatting ahead of them. The moist globes of their animals' eyes were an endless string of hard jewels that was coming down on the Gatling to choke it off and snap its spine and eliminate it.

Everyone was firing and firing wildly and sucking burnt fingers and re-loading and firing. The bone-saw bite of belly-torn agony fluted above the soft thunder of horses and was raucous over the steady chugging of the Gatling.

Claflin Hewes fired the last shot of his life and folded to his punctured chest. His fingers relaxed and fell open and tiny sweat feathers flowed along the damp metalwork of his gun.

The attack bulged at them in a hellish cacophony of exploding metal and heaving flesh; and burst ahead of itself and spilled a dozen men loose and broke under the riveting of the Gatling and whirled away and scattered wide.

Yvonne tagged two men and spun a third off his swaying saddle and then punched the life from the two she'd tagged.

Mr. Burleigh whooped and squeezed the Adams empty and yelled for bullets. The man Matthew was firing from the knee, casually and nicely. Range stuff. And then of the dozen men who had been flung loose from the cracking control of the attack, there were but three, and they were hurling themselves west into the darkness.

Hannibal's right tricep was numb; it felt heavy. He stared at it, and saw dark stains eat their way down the worn black-and-white check of his sleeve.

The wood-passer was calling, "You better come here."

Claflin Hewes made a small smile for Hannibal. "You may win this fight . . . m'boy."

Hannibal crouched closer; his ears were still echoing with gunfire, and the major's voice was a whisper screened through his beard. "You'll be with us."

Hewes' smile faded. He managed to move his head slightly. "Don't play cards with 'em . . . an' don't let 'em get you drunk." The smile came again—a jerk of dying lips, no more. "Have a good fight with . . . Yvonne. You'll both . . . love it. . . ."

Then it was all over for Claflin Hewes, major, Cavalry, USA.

Hannibal swung his face up to the evening skies. He had heard that sometimes, if you look fast, you can see the soldier-dead cantering through the stars to the

HAWLEY YORK

boundless plains of a shrouded eternity.

He thought he heard field music in his head, and caisson chains growling and infantry stamping. He faced down, saluted heavily, and gave his arm to Yvonne.

Matthews re-loaded gingerly, not wanting to touch the fiery breeching. He pointed the weapon aside. "He's gone to pick cotton, suh. That one."

Hannibal thought, Four graves to build. We can't dig. He picked out the squashed grape shapes of the four who were gone: Quarles, by his horse; Claflin Hewes, by his gun. The wood-passer and the steward.

"Matthews? You've handled a gun before, I reckon."

The man stiffened, thumbs to seams. "Ninth Cavalry, suh. Farrier sah-gent, Company C, General George Crook's expedition. Palo Duro, Colonel Rust. Three

Forks, Colonel Mackenzie. The Rio—"

"That's enough." Hannibal wiped his nose, and sniffled. "You're sergeant-major now. Put a detail on the picket and one on the—Company C? My old letter. And scrabble for rocks and make cairns for the dead." He began to box with his right arm to work the numbness from it. He counted his command. There were five, beside himself. Yvonne was a gun now, not a cringing thing as Hannibal had feared she might become; and there was Mr. Burleigh, jovial on the surface of his sorrow; and there was Matthew and one other steward and the wood-passer. Six guns plus a Gatling plus the seven remaining horses.

"Ammunition count," Hannibal ordered. "An' let me know how the airtights stand." He felt the Gatling, and it seared his knuckles. He punched the darkness a few times more.

He said to Yvonne, "You re-loaded?"

"One of the first things my father ever taught me."

"Then help me take the shirts off the bodies so's we can make bandage strips. We may need 'em."

THE hit steward hitched his butt away from the dead steward and displayed the ragged blue hole in his coffee-hued stomach. Mr. Burleigh sucked his torn wrist, not wincing.

And night came down and they were alone under the steel arch of the Dakota skies.

The first engineer spat angrily. "Can we hold off again, Husted?"

"As long as this Sheppard Plow"—he patted the cooling Gatling—"can make furrows, I think we'll be all right."

It was a Yankee lie and he knew it, but there was nothing else to say. There was nothing else to do, but thrust ahead for Killdeer, and in a way that pleased Hannibal Husted. His kind do not rest calmly on the defense; they must move, make action, settle the thing.

"Maybe," Mr. Burleigh was murmuring, "we could send the young lady back under escort of one man."

"Back where?"

The first engineer considered it. There was nothing on the Missouri but the broken hulk of the *Queen*, giving herself up to the greedy river. "That's right, I guess." Mr. Burleigh felt old, in that instant. He was well up the ladder of life but the exertion had not tired him until now. He imagined, glumly, that it was the young men; they were always climbing up behind you, breathing on your heels. Seeing things you couldn't see, evaluating circumstances by a set of standards quite different from your own. "I should have known."

Hannibal said to him, for the benefit of everybody, "If all of us try to sneak back, or even blunder up to Berthold—why, we'd be chopped to little pieces inside five miles."

Nobody said anything. Yvonne labored at Mr. Burleigh's bullet-slash, having finished with the steward's stomach. The wood-passer was holding his head in his hands.

Matthew sat down cross-legged in the crushed snow. He was glad he'd served with the 9th Cavalry, after the War; it had equipped him to keep alive now. He hadn't wanted to soldier all his life, there was more and easier money on the river. But he couldn't complain now. He was still living. He might return to the river, come spring, if this knobby white-folks who talked through his nose had his way.

Hannibal told them, "So we'll swing southwest toward the trace of the Heart River and try to reach Killdeer somehow." A sudden smile broke across his numbed face. "Killdeer Mountain is my private alp." He sneezed. "We'll leave the deltas on our right. I don't know much about cavalry, I walked to the war, but I don't reckon horse people'd favor a whole handful of rivers when they can only cross one. I hope the Berthold people look at it that way."

Matthew got off the snow and lifted his gun. "The water's still running, in the middle channels, an' I think you're right, suh. . . . I'll take first relief."

TOWARD mid-morning the sun warmed their backs. It softened the snow-crust and made slush where drifts had been. Hannibal felt less pity for his people because of that warmth. He had felt pity only for them, not for himself; but now it ebbed away as they made little jokes and tossed small talk back and forth.

It seemed that they'd been marching since summer. There was nothing but the

(Please turn to page 102)

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(Continued from page 100)

march—the rise and fall of hoofs, the lurch and shift of stiff saddles warming to sodden butts; the screak and scrink of harness and equipment. Everything else—the four cairns far behind them, the dead *Queen* and her cargo of swollen corpses—was in another world. It is a protective numbness of the mind, a healing process that soothes the agonies of physical and mental torture.

Hannibal remembered something Claflin Hewes had told him, long ago. It seemed long ago, at least; it had been uttered over brandy in a warm, paneled cabin:

"If you have a feeling for the field—and few do—you can see it as a diagram. Otherwise, you're blind-drunk, plungin' around trying to pin a tail on a donkey that'll pin a tail on you."

Hannibal propped up a diagram as he rode. It was a damp white plate, such as this land, only there wasn't an ant on it, but a mouse. A venomous mouse with fangs, wriggling off the plate. And all around three sides of the plate were mounted cats, taking their time, maybe fashioning an elaborate trap somewhere. Killdeer, for example. If the mouse tried to scamper off the plate, the cats would spring. The mouse must keep moving, and fight on the cats' terms. The mouse only had two advantages: his fangs, and the remote chance of bigger mice stumbling across him and offering help. Blue-clad mice, these, and with sharper fangs.

Yvonne was beside him, letting her horse plod at its own pace. The other four were strung out behind, with the Gatling rigged to the empty horse in the center of the tiny column. "You still want to buy me that dress?"

"Sure—an' a fur tippet to match."

She was delighted. "You'll have to buy it in hell, you know."

That stopped his mouth for a few seconds. But then he said, "You won't want to stay warm in—hell, will you?"

"I don't know, I've never been there, but I guess I'm going." The false delight left her.

"Not everybody does."

She got her chin off the rough lacing of her blouse and shook her head, defiantly. "Dock gamins do."

"I don't know any." He eyed the nooning sun; he followed its reflection to the glistening black current of the Heart, just ahead. And dim down the flickering white distances was the lump of Killdeer. A panic whimper of fear shook the thin curtain of his self-control. He didn't want to die, he wanted to live and create something from this land. He wanted to have the best damned ranch in Dakota. He wanted to battle for the rest of his life—battle the weather, battle the seasons, battle for a good living. Battle with Yvonne. "And you don't know any either."

"If that's the way you want it." She shrugged. "My name is Carrieux. . . Maybe we'll both be in hell before long, and that's the name you ask for me by." She laughed. "I'll be with my father."

"He's dead?"

"On the river, before the war, when he was going home. He said someone named Coke would kill him if any man ever did. Coke or"—she took a small breath—"Koch." She exhaled. "Coke killed my father for his deed."

Hannibal whirled. "Owen Koch?"

"His father, I figure it. His father got the deed to this land—all thirteen thousand miles of it. I also guess—because you have to guess when you don't know—that Coke sent it to his son, back east somewheres. The son—this friend of yours?—had a man named Brackenfall survey it." She reined in as Hannibal reined in. "You've got the survey in your pocket."

"I'm wearing Brackenfall's clothes."

"That's what Hawley York said. . . Oh look—there's York now!"

Across the rushing blackness of the rock-torn Heart sat Hawley York on a patch-colored quarter horse. Owen Koch emerged from winter-killed cottonwoods and sat a hammer-headed bay. There was movement behind the blackened trees, much movement, as of men keeping low behind the shoulder of a melting bank.

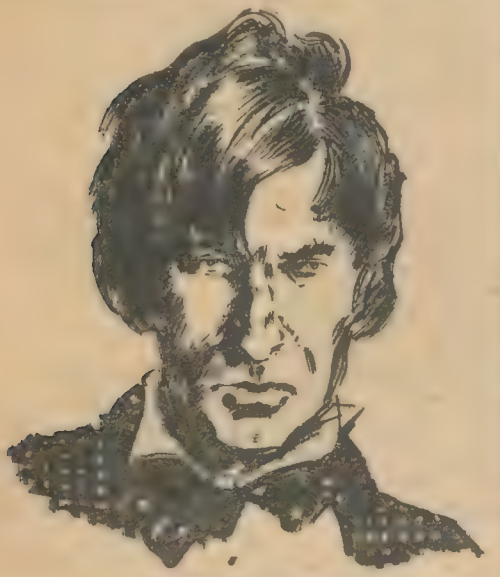
Hannibal swallowed. "The social situation is reversed." York had sent out an invitation to disaster, and they had come to the party.

HANNIBAL'S horizons shrank into him and he could see, could hear, only the river and the people across it. The river was making rushing noises, eager noises, as if anxious to end this human silliness. There

was plenty of room in the river for all humans.

The invisible men behind York and Koch were making rushing noises, eager noises, as if anxious to end this human silliness and get on with the business of empire. They were spreading east and west along the bank, trying to keep quiet and, therefore, creating more noise. The early afternoon sun struck Killdeer's crags and valleys and flowed into its bush-bearded folds.

Owen Koch spoke behind his hand to



HANNIBAL HUSTED

Hawley York. York nodded, expressionless.

Koch took his hand down and centered on Hannibal's motionless cavalcade. Hannibal could see those features as clearly as if they had been a photograph in a small frame. Crisp of side hair and wild of eye and with big, fast hands.

Koch waved one of them. "Hullo there, Hannibal! How's Knobby today?"

"Fine, Owen." He had to call across the river-split distance. "You're on my land."

Koch flung laughter to the skies. It was not nice laughter. "Fifteen years is a long time, Knobby." He laughed again. "That Company C behind you?"

"Somethin' just as good." Hannibal was hanging onto his self-control with everything he had. Cold hate was crushing that control downward out of sight.

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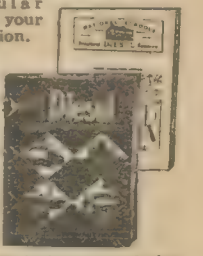

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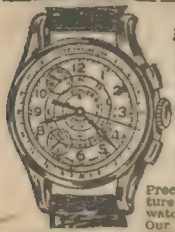

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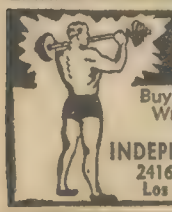

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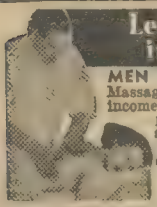

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York cupped palms to his neatly-trimmed mustache ends. "Come on over, alone, Yvonne. Everything's forgotten now."

Hannibal had never seen a female spit before. Hers cracked into the snow and she used a hand on her jaws man-fashion.

Koch and York appeared to be waiting for something, to be deliberately wasting time for a purpose.

Hannibal shifted his eyes without moving his face—shifted them left and right, downstream and upstream. An encirclement is what he could expect.

A crystal spatter of white water appeared far downstream and the tiny dark form of a man on a plunging horse crossed the tail of Hannibal's left eye. His diaphragm rose queerly and his stomach sank.

The sun was a pale copper plate suspended over Killdeer's distant rises.

White water came from far upstream, with the visual effect of breaking glass.

York's palms were holding his mustache again. "You'd better come over, Yvonne." Hawley York had found no Indian to sell her to, and besides, it promised to be a long, freezing, lonely winter.

Hannibal did several things consecutively, without pausing but not hurrying. And because his movements were unhurried, he managed to dismount and walk to the Gatling and get it tripodded before Owen Koch cried out.

Matthew and Mr. Burleigh and the wounded steward and the wood-passer calmly hauled the horses together as Hawley York went downstream at the gallop. Koch put himself upstream, west. The winter-rotted cottonwoods directly cross-stream became filled with movement.

Yvonne turned her horse over to Matthew, took a single bullet from her elkskins and placed it carefully under her tongue.

Hannibal cocked his Peacemaker and turned to the first engineer. "Mr. Burleigh, if you'd help me with this? It's got to be done."

The Peacemaker and the Adams snatted and cracked alternately and the gray and white smoke of seven explosions slipped easily away from the seven thrashing horses. One did not die well and Mr. Burleigh had to crouch, aim and fire once more.

"Re-load now, Mr. Burleigh." Hannibal had learned that from Sam Chamberlain

himself, a stickler for keeping weapons fed. Ol' Zach Taylor had probably been the same way—and Prescott, too, when he had stuff to load with.

Hannibal braced a shoulder under the Gatling's tripod plate and opened the wing-nuts on the legs and let the piece down to where it barely cleared the dead curves of the circle of horses. He tightened the wing-nuts and wrenched clear of the plate and motioned to the wood-passer to stand by with ammunition. There wasn't much left.

"Down all the way, folks."

A FAR thrumming filled the outer spaces of the chilling afternoon—hoofs beating snow. Then the six people lying behind the shot horses saw them coming, heard them yelling. They were coming down from left and right.

Hannibal clutched Yvonne's chin and kissed her on the mouth.

Spang-sharp was the first volley from the river. A lunging front of men was descending from the near bank.

Hannibal gulped down a sob, and his mouth tasted brown. He half-shut his eyes and planted his grounded knees wide and cranked. The Gatling bucked.

From left and right the other two bands hurled themselves at the mangled position with febrile intent to wash the defenders off their feet and roll them up and cut them down.

Hannibal got the Gatling around and took a re-load and lay to the hot crank.

The riders ripped out a yell and flattened themselves to straining necks and fired past jerking bridles and prepared to catapult the barricade of prone horses.

The Gatling, two hand guns and three rifles bit with brass fangs at this paw-swipe and hurt it badly and knocked it off-balance and frayed its claws and sent it to one side, eyes luminous with madness. It swirled riverward and re-gathered by the bank.

The rush from downriver thinned and spread out and mingled with the attack from the cottonwoods and cantered wide around to the north and trailed toward the upriver men who were reorganizing out of range on the near bank.

Play it as dealt, Claflin Hewes had preached to himself and anyone he had deemed worth his attention.

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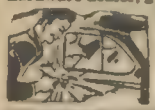

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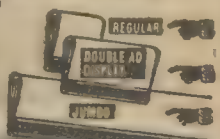

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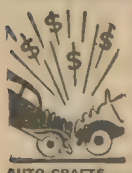

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GEORGE C. APPELL

Hannibal arm-thrusted his shaggy hair from his face and snuffled wetly and reloaded. The stomach-wounded steward was sitting with a torn leg in front of him, studying it philosophically. Matthew was big and bronze in the cold sunlight and he was perspiring. "Look yonner, suh!"

A dozen fractured bodies lay crumpled in the chopped snow between the position and the river. Half a dozen horses were down, two of them thumping off-legs fitfully. Mr. Burleigh spoke to his Adams and the Adams punched the animals from earthly pain.

West from the position four men lay, one of them buckled backward, his belt fastening high at the top of the arc formed by his snapped spine.

One of the fractured bodies moved, and Matthew hip-fired and stilled it.

Hannibal scratched the back of his neck. "They rate the Order of the Nutmeg. That's the wooden cross you get buried under. . . How are we?" He was searching Yvonne's small face.

"We're fine." She flipped him a wink.

He flipped one back at her. Then he saw the wood-passer dangling a tired arm outward. The attack was coming again, was beginning to circle down from the near bank as one group, not three. It would circle wide and then tighten its grip like a closing fist and crush the position and leave it for the wolves.

Mr. Burleigh bit off the end of his last cigar, spat out the dottle, took an immense bite and started jawing it. He tucked the remaining half of the cigar in his upper vest pocket. "How much steam you got left in that gun?"

"About ten minutes' worth."

Yvonne removed the bullet from under her tongue, examined it, and replaced it.

Mr. Burleigh's cheek swelled outward, distended by cigar juice. "Then what?"

"The card game's over, that's what."

York's patch-colored quarter-horse and Koch's hammer-headed bay were eel-graceful with body motion as they lined out and around to northward and down toward the east reaches of the river. It was as if they were using the fifty riders left to them as magnets which might draw out the filings of the Gatling position.

The wood-passer's smile was sick. "Won-

der what's become of them others? The ones took out northwest from the Knife to cut off the cavalry?"

Nobody knew; nobody cared to consider it. It didn't make any difference where those others were because the present odds were fifty-two to six, notably bad for the short end.

A hoarse call rose from the forming circle; York tugged his patch horse around northward. Owen Koch came sharp about and wig-wagged an arm and halted the half hundred men behind him.

Mr. Burleigh worked his jaws in and out, inhaled through his nostrils and squirted cigar-juice into the re-freezing snow. "There they come," he said simply.

THEY came out of the snow-hung passes of a steep slope overlooking the Heart River from the northwest. They rode tiredly, with arms at their sides and faces down.

Hannibal counted twenty. "Which jacks the odds to seventy-two to six."

Yvonne gave a little shrug. "Chin up—as my father used to say when he was about to hit a man on the jaw. It's not everybody who can die at home."

A soft look passed between them, and Hannibal nodded. "Niggles didn't make—"

Mr. Burleigh gasped. He extended clawed fingers, face wide open in awe. "Yipers Crikes—as ol' Cap'n Bagshaw of the *Nellie Peck* used to say—look what's coming with 'em!"

Ranked in twos, easy at the walk, preceded by a scarcely-rippling guidon, came horsemen on matched animals. Grays in the lead, duns in the rear. Whites behind the second guidon.

"Two troops," Matthew husked.

The first twenty riders—the ones affecting fur hats and mackinaws and mountain boots—had their hands lashed wrist-to-wrist under their cinchings.

Everyone at the Gatling was standing up. Hannibal breathed, "An' hooray for Mr. Niggles."

No sound now, no noise. No trumpet or shout or gunsmack.

Like silent puppets on a silent stage the twenty riders and their hundred troop escorts plodded toward the Heart; halfway to it from the pass, a man's voice sounded

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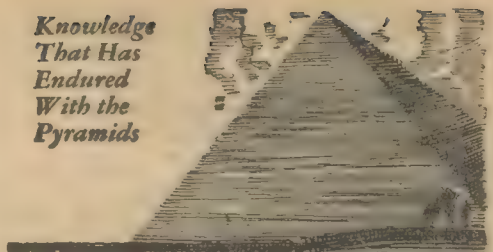

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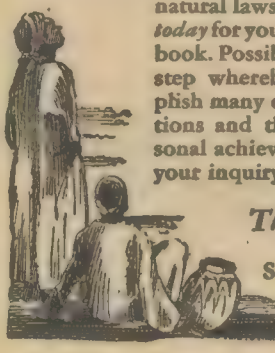

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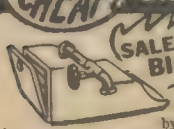

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and the tied men shuffled closer together. A blue rider darted away from the gray troop, breath pluming like light breech smoke.

One of his gloves see-sawed stiffly and the gray troop pulsed into a canter and filed a-flank of the tied men; the remainder cantered after the man with the out-held glove. That glove sank to his pommel and the westering sun winked off metal.

Koch's screech was banshee-wild. He raked his rowels and swung around toward the river and hugged his horse's neck. Then they were all streaking south for the Heart and the blue rider used his glove hand again and the troop right-fronted into line and went to the gallop. Still no heavy noise, no trumpet, no gun.

Hannibal leapt to his crank and swung his cylinders ahead of the passing stampede and held fire a moment. Hawley York sped south so close to the Gatling that Hannibal could have hit him with a rock.

A silver flash arced across the sunlight and there was the brief sound of an exhale. York yelped and tried to reach behind him and bent backward and came off his horse and flopped into a half-spin and landed on the hilt that stuck out from his rear ribs. He kicked for a moment, one arm flailing. Then his muscles collapsed and he was quiet in the snow.

"He always did want that knife." Yvonne brushed her hands in a finished motion. "He can keep it."

The stampede rumbled past and tore the current off the Heart and surged south through the dead cottonwoods. A trumpet's urgent brass summons racketed down the distances.

A rider detached himself from the guarded column and pumped toward the Gatling position and flung his arms in and out. He brought his horse down and wheeled off clumsily and hopped a carcass and stumbled up to them. "Thought you might put a hole in me." Mr. Niggles shook hands feverishly, showing his lop-sided bridgework in a happy grin. "Where's the captain? How're the—but here." He got a flask out. "Took me two days to raise the fort—second one on webbed shoes. . . . You first, Mr. Burleigh."

"To the *Western Queen*," the first engineer offered.

Mr. Niggles knew what was coming by the flat expressions on their faces, and he contained whatever emotion he felt. He heard Mr. Burleigh tell of Captain Quarles and the three who lay with him; and Mr. Niggles gave himself a tug at the flask.

Hannibal tramped out to Hawley York's body and turned it over and gazed at the face.

Darkness was drawing a veil across the land and Yvonne stepped through it and hooked into Hannibal's arm. "Get away from that. . . Come over to the fire."

Someone had squad fires smuttering below the cottonwoods; the figures who were hauling wood still had their hands tied wrist-to-wrist. Mr. Niggles was flourishing his hands excessively and recounting without a stop for breath how they had come on the forty men who had tried to prevent the troops from reaching the Knife and of how there were now but twenty men and they'd been used as a shield to take the command to the rendezvous and of how he himself a ship's clerk suspected all the time that—

Mr. Burleigh shoved the flask into Mr. Niggles' mouth and held it there.

Hannibal stepped over York and approached Matthew. "You're still the sergeant-major until relieved. Hoist that Gatling up to the fires and cut off the harness from the dead horses. I can use it on my ranch."

"We can, scarecrow." Her fists were on her hips.

"I don't want any more arguments, I've had enough of 'em to last a lifetime. When I say—"

"It's my land, farmer. Don't forget it." Her dark eyes caught firelight and flung it up at him.

"Lissen. We're a stubborn lot, we Maine men, and when we have somethin' we hang onto it. So if you think—"

She clucked her tongue, grinned whitely, swung a thumb. "Why don't you come get it—if you want to hang onto it?" And she was racing toward the river with shawl off and hair flying and mouth open in a lunglow laugh that imparted speed to Hannibal Husted's big feet and sent him over their land faster than he'd ever thought a Maine man could go.

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(Continued from page 41)

of hoofs at either end and he saw what must be Luke Breckinridge ride in from the back alley and club Collins into a heap with the butt of his pistol; someone on horseback trailed a rope across Bill Denvers' feet. . . .

The sharp, unpleasant sting of ammonia spirits put its tongs into his consciousness and he looked up into lamplight to see Doc Wells' gnomelike face regarding him with disgust. Denvers' sleeve was slashed and there was a temporary bandage around his shoulder; a cauterizing agent bit into the wound, sharpening his senses. Something urgent was on the doctor's mind as he opened his mouth to speak to Denvers, but Denvers heaved himself erect, his boot toe touching his gun. He bent down and picked it up, his mind completely clear now; and he grasped the other by the coat.

"Where did they go? What did they do with him? Quick!" And he started a second later for the street at a half-run with the medico's words, "Dekker's corral. . . ."

It was a cattlemen's crowd he walked into at the end of Main Street, a familiar crowd, with only a thin scattering of spooky and undecided townsmen milling about its fringes.

Collins had been brought to and was sitting on a wagon, hands tied behind his back, under the tall gate of Dekker's corral. Hogan had a rope around Collins' neck and over the crossbar and was slowly pulling it taut to make the man stand up on the tailboard of the wagon.

Denvers spoke tiredly, yet the timbre of his voice tapped the man sharply. "Drop the rope, Hogan."

Hogan hesitated, looked to Denvers as if to make sure of who had spoken. He glanced up at the rope; but when his eyes once more sought Denvers the rope came slithering over the cross bar.

Winfield Herrick broke the sudden, dead quiet, "What the hell is this, Bill? Are you out of your mind? He tried to kill you!"

DENVERS swiveled his glance to the three men whose authority and power he had been. "Maybe he had call to, Win; but that's beside the point now." And he spoke again to Hogan, wearily, "Get that rope off him."

"Not that easy! Not that easy!" Herrick came forward a couple of steps, a sick smile on his face. "We understand about George, and it's too bad; but you can't change this."

Against that came the solid finality in Denvers' tone, "But it *has* changed, Win. The law found for him. Nobody touches this man." He made the slightest gesture toward his gun. "I mean that."

He stood now in George's place, but the voice was his own.

"Well?"

Winfield said at last, in a sullen, broken exasperated voice, as if he had waited for someone's initiative other than his own, and it hadn't come, "All right, Bill; all right. We'll let this pass for now, but we'll see about this. We'll see . . ." And he wheeled angrily toward his horse, carrying his broken prestige with him as a shroud.

With these words and in this moment the country changed. The king was hollow. And something died in Bill Denvers as he realized that he should have known it long, long ago.

More tired than ever, he spoke to the men. "It's all over, boys. Go home. Hit the leather." But they were already fading, dispersing with relieved willingness.

Denvers was at the wagon himself then, untying Collins' bonds and helping him down, sending him off to his family. Hogan stood by for a moment, coiling up his rope. He said awkwardly, "No hard feelings, if that's the way it's going to be," and moved away with the others.

Alone Bill Denvers stood under the corral gate, a hollow, lost man, the past of which he had just let go draining him of strength while he tried futilely to grasp at the present.

A voice called to him out of the darkness, and as he looked up he saw Edna Slater standing at the end of the boardwalk, waiting for him. "Bill," she said. "Bill."

The quality of the tone seemed to lift him from far back and over the turbulent years, and he began to perceive incredulously as she came slowly towards him, that somehow, somewhere there might still be hope that all might not be lost, that no matter how late the time, there is always one more chance.

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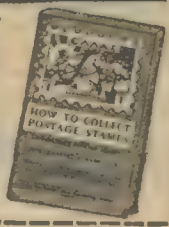

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(Continued from page 14)

Mexico followed, and that worthy evidenced a keen interest in American affairs. Would Becknell and his men consider another expedition?

On May 22, 1822, Becknell and twenty others set out over the newly-established Santa Fe Trail. This time, however, they had three covered wagons, each one so full of goods that it required six mules to pull it.

The first part of the trip had been rugged. Many of their horses were stampeded by a roving herd of buffalo, and they were attacked by Osages, who captured and flogged two of their number. Eight days later, after rounding up their mounts and recovering the stolen goods, they were once more on their way.

Remembering only too well the high, bleak mountain paths near Raton Pass, where the horses had suffered so much the previous year—and where it would be impossible to navigate with wagons—Becknell decided to try a shortcut. Accordingly, they left the Arkansas valley and struck out across the bleak and treacherous sand hills that were later to be known as the Cimarron Crossing or Cutoff, or more commonly, the *Jornado del Muerto*—Journey of Death.

Men and animals suffered terribly under the scorching sun. The water ran out after a difficult climb to the rim of a plateau. Beyond the plateau would be the cool, plentiful water of the Cimarron. At least, the Spaniards had said so. But the Spaniards hadn't reckoned with a freak of nature, for it was during these hot, dry months that the Cimarron went underground. In fact, Becknell and his men crossed the dry river bed without recognizing it.

When the land started sloping upward again, Becknell called a halt. It was the third day without water. . . .

"But it will mean givin' up the expedition—and a new route to Santa Fe, Cap'n Billy!" one of his men finally managed to protest through cracked lips.

"That's right," Becknell conceded in despair, as the last grains of sand dropped from his fingers, like the sands in an hour glass. "But I can't ask you men to go on."

"Look!"

All turned and followed the pointing finger of one of the thirst-maddened men. At first they thought it was a mirage. Then they saw it was real—a lone buffalo bull!

He was a mangy old critter—an outcast who could no longer keep up with the herd. He plodded slowly up out of the dry arroyo. The shaggy old maverick was about the most welcome sight those heat-crazed men had ever seen.

"That means just one thing!" another cried. "There's water around somewhere close!"

A few of the traders reached for their Sharps rifles and stole back to the arroyo, where they hid themselves along the route the old buffalo was traveling. One shot brought him down and immediately they fell upon the carcass, ripping it open. The stomach bulged with water. There was a little of the lukewarm fluid for everyone in the party.

Then two of the number, armed with canteens, backtracked along the bull's trail. A few miles along the dry wash they found a pool in the sand where they filled their canteens, after which the wagons were moved to the spot.

From one waterhole to another they moved up the dry river-bed of the Cimarron, then they headed southwest, refreshed in body and spirit. The rest of the journey was by no means easy, but they finally arrived in Santa Fe, where a reception awaited them. And the steady migration over the Santa Fe Trail was on!

Get the drift by now? The sense of humor we're talking about is that same dammittohell-spirit, that ability to cut sign on your situation and then go ahead and do something about it, for better or for worse, that you'll find in the March issue of *Dime Western,* in a trail drive novel by George C. Appell, a Tensleep story by Bart Cassidy, a story by John Jo Carpenter, a manhunt novelette by Richard Matheson and the $2.50 Value Novel for March, *Good Man For A Bad Town,* by William Chamberlain. And all your regular departments and features'll be there too.

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—The Editor

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